WORLD OF WOMEN—Here, No Man Was Safe

fantastic

SCIENCE-FICTION

FEBRUARY

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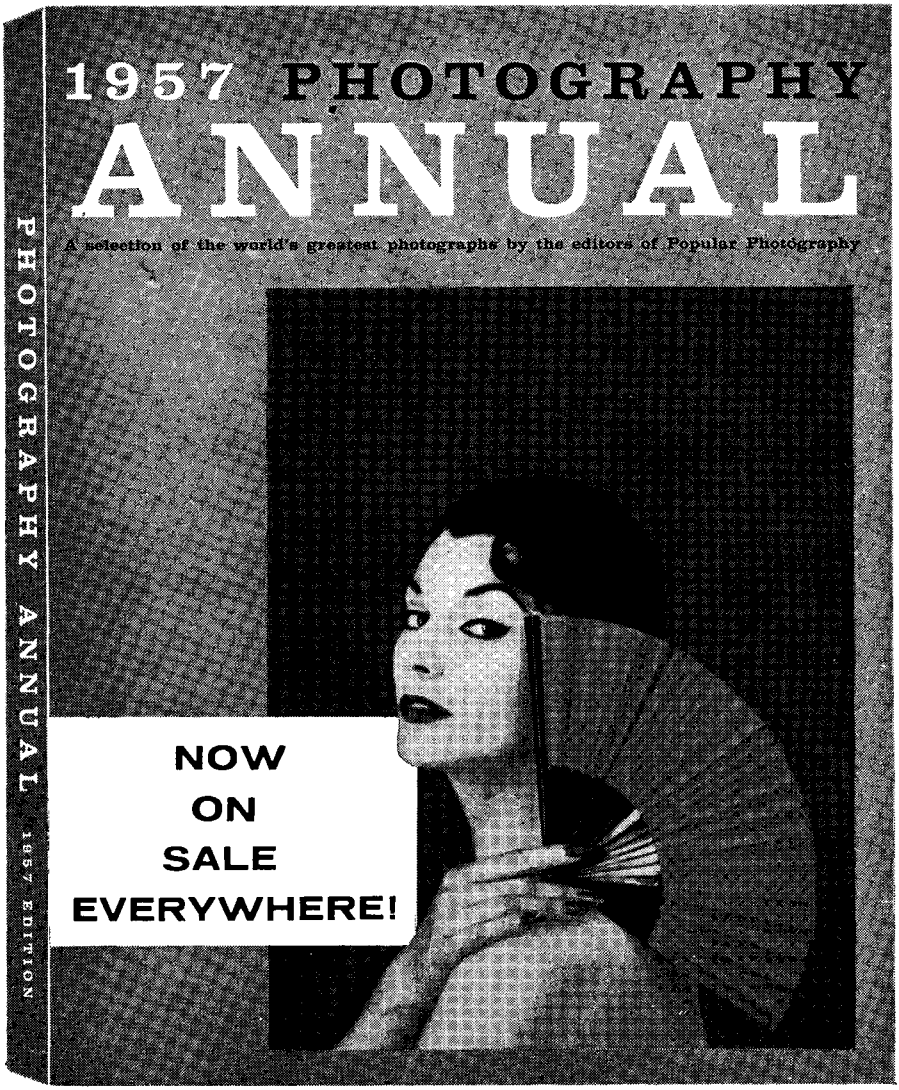

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BY THE EDITOR

THINGS WE'VE ALWAYS WONDERED ABOUT —

Why do policemen wear their guns way back on their hips where any thug can sneak up and grab them . . . Why do people sitting alone at bars always wear such grim expressions . . . How can women possibly walk in shoes with four-inch heels . . . How do baseball players keep their socks up . . . What do two wrestlers say to each other in the dressing room after a match . . . Did a baseball fan ever commit suicide after his team lost a pennant . . . How many people have actually read "War And Peace" from cover to cover . . . Why is it, when you walk onto a subway platform, the train you want is always just pulling out . . . When you save your dimes to blow your child to a special treat at a very snooty restaurant, why does the little brat always say, "I want a hot dog, Daddy" . . . What would happen if every smoker in the country had to give up cigarettes for one week . . . Do the number of people in the United States who can swim outnumber those who can ride a bicycle . . . How many men who resolve to become financially solid before they marry, stick to that resolution . . . How many gals who swear to marry rich men are able to find one . . . What would happen to our economic structure if people suddenly refuse to stand in line in theaters, banks, or anywhere else . . . Do street pitchmen actually make a living . . . Will cooking become a lost art what with the scrumptious packaged cakes, frozen pies, ready-to-eat dinners, and all the other prepared foods on the market . . . Will anybody, after reading this, care one way or another what this editor wonders about?

PWF

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CONTENTS

BIDDY AND THE SILVER MAN
By E. K. Jarvis 6

WORLD OF WOMEN
By Harlan Ellison 30

THE MYSTERY OF DENEB IV
By Robert Silverberg 56

BEAUTY CONTEST?
By Henry Slesar 68

MY ROBOT
By O. H. Leslie 81

AN ENEMY OF PEACE
By Ralph Burke 86

A KISS FOR THE CONQUEROR
By Clyde Mitchell 99

DEPARTMENTS

LOW MAN ON THE ASTEROID
By The Editor 3

ACCORDING TO YOU . . .
By The Readers 104

THE BOOK RACK
By Villiers Gerson 108

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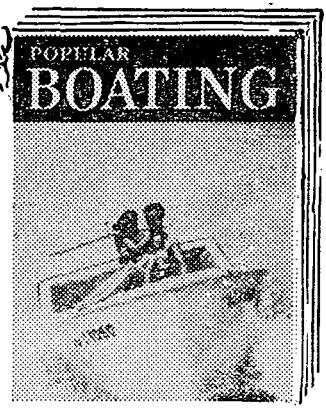

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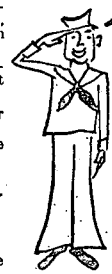

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A NEW MAGAZINE BY THE PUBLISHERS OF FANTASTIC

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Biddy and the

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Silver Man

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BIDDY AND THE SILVER MAN

By E. K. JARVIS

A man came out of the sky and they took him and hanged him from the nearest tree thinking that they lynched a devil. But perhaps they crucified a saint instead—there in the beauty of the desert. And what place could be more worthy of being called a second Calvary?

IT WAS a typical blazing Arizona day. Pitiless sun distorting the desert and making Sage Bend look like a toy town off in the distance. Sage Bend and the surrounding desert were bone-dry, furnace-hot, and generally depressing, but there were compensations. Buck liked it and Biddy liked it because it was a country where a small crippled girl and a tiny burro could go almost anywhere they pleased without danger.

Biddy was twelve. Polio had struck during her tenth year necessitating a clumsy brace on her left leg. Thus it was a little difficult to play with the children of Sage Bend and so Biddy's father had brought Buck in from the Circle-7 ranch to be her companion.

Buck was a shaggy philosophical burro with ears almost as long as his legs. He was gentle, rugged, and small enough for Biddy to mount all by herself. Reliable, too. Buck would take Biddy anywhere she wanted to go but he insisted on getting home to the little corral behind the house at a reasonable hour so there was never any coming in after dark.

There were many places around Sage Bend where a child and a burro could go. Up in the foothills where Hoppy chased the bad men with Biddy and Buck racing along in front of the posse. Or to the caves and *arroyos* where an ogre or a giant sometimes captured a handsome prince and held him

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until Biddy and Buck came along to rescue him.

They knew all the fascinating and magical places, these two, and they were now headed for a flat next to King Arthur's castle where there would be jousting that afternoon. Biddy said, "We'll have to hurry, Buck. We mustn't keep Sir Launcelot waiting or he won't toss us his handkerchief as he goes into the lists."

Buck wig-wagged complete understanding with his ears and increased his speed not one iota. But he signified that there was plenty of time and that they would make it.

"It will be a wonderful tourney, Buck. With all the knights and ladies."

Buck agreed as he pattered up the gulch toward the ridges, his absurd little legs twinkling.

"A wonderful day and—wait a minute, Buck."

Buck stopped and flopped his ears while Biddy stared thoughtfully at a ridge.

Biddy stared for quite a while with a little frown between her blue eyes. Then she looked all around as though to reassure herself of her location. "There's a cave up there, Buck."

The news failed to stir any great interest in the burro.

"It wasn't there before. That's the place where Roy Rogers caught those rustlers and licked all four of them single handed. There were some rocks, but not any cave." Biddy looked about swiftly and a tiny prickle touched the back of her neck and then was gone. It was so quiet around here; so suddenly still and waiting-like.

But that was foolish. It was always still up here in the ridges except for a horny toad maybe scraping faintly on a rock or a little dust-devil stirring the dry grass as it stood on its tail and whirled.

Always quiet and she was being foolish. Roy or Hoppy or Davey Crockett wouldn't sit there half-afraid. Biddy said, "Let's go, Buck," and urged the burro to the left toward the rocks.

The cave was clearly visible from the foot of the big boulders and Biddy waited for some moments before she slid off Buck and began climbing the hill. Her leg brace impeded her progress somewhat and clicked every time she took a step.

"No, it couldn't have been here before," she said. "That spot was just a wall in the rock. That was where Roy Rogers fell back and was real

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groggy for a minute after the bad man smashed a ten-pound boulder right down on his head."

But obviously, there was no solid rock wall now; instead, a rectangular opening clean and even as though cut out of soft butter with a sharp knife. Biddy moved resolutely forward. Ten feet from the opening, she stopped and glanced back at Buck for moral support. Buck slapped at a fly with his left ear and closed his eyes and gave all the moral support he had. Biddy stiffened her little chin and went on.

It was a cave all right but the fact of its being was overshadowed by what it contained. There was plenty of light to see without going inside and Biddy stood in the entrance and stared wide-eyed.

The main thing inside was a big box with funny knobs and dials on it; a box of some kind of shining metal that almost hurt your eyes when you looked at it. There were other things too—a lot of wires and a funny looking chair and a thing that might have been a loud speaker of some kind maybe.

Biddy's mind raced. The Eastern Bloc? She turned her eyes up into the sky where she could just make out the space station up there a thousand miles away going around the Earth like another moon watching day and night to see to it the people and the children of the Western Bloc were always safe.

Maybe this box belonged to the Eastern Bloc. They had their own space station but Biddy was just ready to bet they wanted to do something to ours! Maybe this was some kind of a machine they sneaked in here and built that would blow up our station. A pretty mean thing to do but the Eastern Bloc did all kinds of mean things.

Biddy was suddenly frightened — real-frightened, not just play-frightened — because what if the men would come out of the cave or from someplace and tie her up and not let her go back and tell Pop and Mom what she'd seen? Then the space station would be blown up and not even Davey Crockett could help because this wasn't like on television where people got killed but not really. This was serious.

Biddy turned slowly, hoping now that the silence would stay as it was and not break into the sound of heavy boots coming after her. It was awfully hard but she

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went back down the hill slowly, because when she went fast her brace rattled and made a lot of noise.

It seemed like a very long time before she was on Buck, urging him out of the *arroyo* and back toward Sage Bend.

And she got a little annoyed at how calmly Buck took it, ambling along at his usual rate and not at all impressed by the danger. But then what could you do with a stupid old burro that didn't even know how to wear armor properly and always shook the plume off his helmet and ate it . . . ?

Dan Parker was tired. He held the jeep on the rutty road from the Circle-7 to Sage Bend and thought of the cold bottle of beer that was waiting for him at home. This twelve-mile drive every morning and night was rough, but what could a man do? A man couldn't put his wife and kid in a bunkhouse with a dozen hands, and there was no other place for Jane and Biddy at the ranch. The house in Sage Bend wasn't so bad, though. The rent was cheap and there were a few friends Jane could talk to.

Dan wiped the dried sweat off his face and wondered why it cost so damn much just to live. Of course, in his case, there was a reason. A big reason. Biddy getting hit with polio had cleaned him out and put him in debt. Not that he begrudged it of course. She was alive and that was the main thing. That damned brace cut him every time he looked at it, but she was alive and healthy again. He had no complaints even if it took him the next ten years to pay off.

He was lucky in a lot of ways. Being foreman at the Circle-7 paid little enough but it was still better than an ordinary cow hand's pay. And young Davey getting hit with polio in spite of all the serums about the same time it had clubbed Biddy down. Funny how bad luck for some was good luck for others. Davey getting hit was tragedy for the boy and for old Sam Taber, his father. But it had been good luck for Dan Parker because if Davey hadn't been crippled he'd be foreman himself and Dan Parker getting straight hand-money. Yeah, bad luck for some—good luck for others. Not that he gloried in Davey's misfortune, but a man had to look out for his own and the cards had just fallen that way.

Sage Bend came into sight and as Dan approached, he saw a plodding figure in the

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middle of the road moving in the same direction. The sight irritated Dan. Even when he got close enough to see the white cane tapping on ahead of the shuffling feet, he was still irritated.

Why did Art Haney have to be like that? He was blind, sure, and everybody felt sorry for him, but he didn't have to rub it in your face. He could hear the jeep coming and could move over out of the way but no, he had to stay smack where he was until you pulled to a dead stop and honked. Then he would jump as though you'd just missed running him down and cower on the side of the road. Didn't want anybody to miss the fact that he was blind and helpless —as if they could!

Dan stopped and honked and watched Art put on his pathetic little act and felt guilty because it didn't stir him. Maybe he was hardened, but what the hell? Every time you came down the road. There's a limit.

Dan called, "Hi Art."

The answering voice had a falsetto that sounded faked. "Oh, it's you, Dan. Blind man can't tell a thing like that."

"Want a ride into town?"

"No—no. I'll hobble along and make it myself. A blind man doesn't like to think he's dependent on everybody. Tries to do the best he can."

"Okay. See you later."

"Sure, but I won't see you, Dan. Could of once, but can't any more."

Dan Parker jammed down the gas pedal and the jeep rammed forward kicking up a cloud of dust that left Art Haney coughing. Dan immediately felt guilty. Mean trick, but he hadn't done it on purpose. Just thoughtless.

He rolled the jeep into town and lifted a hand as he passed the jail. Cecil Bates, sheriff of the county lifted one in return but his expression never changed. Sour—that was the word, Dan thought. Cecil felt himself wasted in a country sheriff's job. Fancied himself of big-town caliber, but all he did was park on a chair in front of the jail and think about it. Sour was the word all right. In fact, Dan thought, sour was the word for the whole damned town of Sage Bend. Come to think of it, there wasn't a happy person in the place.

Except Biddy.

Dan parked the jeep and went in the house and got a bottle of beer out of the refrigerator. He went on through and out into the

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backyard where Jane was taking down the last of the wash. Damn—it seemed women were always washing. Come home and everytime they were hanging clothes or taking them down.

He stopped in the doorway and looked at Jane. Looked to actually see her which was not the same as the ordinary looking people usually did. There was a stoop in her slim shoulders and something—well, something in the way she carried her body. Tired-like. She'd been so deuced pretty when he'd married her; so pretty he'd just had to have her and that was the only way. Why kid himself? He'd married her because he wanted her and love, if there really was such a thing, had come afterward. But it had come; or maybe it was habit. Anyhow, he couldn't think of life anymore except in terms of Jane and Biddy.

But it would be nice if just one more time—just one night—there could be the old spark, the old breathless fire that flamed so briefly and had now smouldered down into a sort of tired consideration—an habitual companionship with each knowing the other's habits and likings and responding automatically.

But what the hell? What could you expect in this day and age? With tension for breakfast and dinner and supper. With those two space stations floating around up there waiting to blow the world up. Watching day and night. There was little room to think of anything else.

Jane turned with an armful of clothes and saw him. Her smile was a quick upturning of her lips and then it was gone. "Home, dear? Have a hard day?"

"Rough. We moved three hundred head in from the north range to the loading platforms."

Jane pushed past him and laid the clothes on the kitchen table. She straightened and pushed a wisp of hair out of her eyes. "Three hundred head. That's quite a few. What are they worth apiece, Dan?"

"Around two hundred and fifty dollars probably."

"And with all that money old Sam can't give you a little raise. I think it's a sin."

"It isn't clear money, hon. Not by any means."

"All the same—"

Dan caught her as she tried to pass and kissed her. She responded after a fashion but when it was over it was over. "I've got to get the potatoes

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on. You go sit on the front porch, I'll call you."

"Where's Biddy?"

Jane stopped with a gesture of frustration as though this was something she'd forgotten. "Oh, that child! I sent her to her room, Dan."

"To her room? Why?"

I just had to. We've got to do something about that imagination of hers. She can't separate reality from fantasy anymore."

"What was it this time?"

"Something about a cave up in the ridges with a big metal box in it. The Eastern Bloc is going to use it to blow our station out of the sky."

Dan shrugged. "Kids live in their own world, honey. Isn't sending her to her room a little rough?"

"I had to. She was going down to tell Cecil Bates about it. Can you imagine what—?"

Dan laughed. "He'd have probably arrested her for spreading rumors. I'll take her out on the porch and talk to her, okay?"

"Just so you keep her out of my hair until I get supper ready."

Dan opened the door of Biddy's room and said, "Hi, pigeon. Hot in there?"

"Not bad, Pop. There's a breeze through the window."

The gruesome leg brace smote him as usual and his inward tightening against it was so habitual that he hardly noticed the slight tension of his chest muscles. He said, "How about coming out on the porch and telling me all about this cave?"

"Is it all right with Mom?"

"Uh-huh. I fixed it."

"She told you about the cave and the box?"

"Just mentioned it in passing. Told me to get the details from you."

He picked her up and carried her out front where they sat down side by side on the front steps and looked out across the miserable little desert town. Dan's eyes fell on the tavern front over near the depot. There would be at least half a dozen drunks in there and after sundown there would be foremen from the ranches roundabout talking them into going back to work.

"The cave wasn't there before."

"It wasn't?"

"No. It's the place I always played Roy Rogers, but I went there yesterday and there was a door in the rock."

"The door was open?"

"Wide open. I went inside and there was a big shiny box in there."

Maybe a man was better

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off in the city—in the war plants. "Well what do you know about that!"

"Pop! You aren't listening."

"Oh yes, I am."

"But you don't believe me."

"I sure do."

"The box had a lot of tubes and dials on it."

Of course, now they'd taken the profit out of war there wasn't much more money there either unless you worked fifteen hours a day. "Was Roy there waiting for you?"

"Pop! It wasn't make believe! The box was really there and the Eastern Bloc is going to use it to wreck our space station."

"They'd better not!" That was another thing. If the blow ever fell and all the brains thought it was sure to, a man had better have his family as far from a city as possible.

"I thought maybe they would capture Buck and me so we couldn't tell on them but there wasn't anybody there. We got away all right."

Not that it would do much good. The radiation would get everybody eventually. Maybe it would be better to be killed quick and get it over with.

"Pop—I'm not fibbing to you—"

Dan roused himself from his somber thoughts. "I know you're not honey. Listen, let's go out and give Buck some water and about that time Mom will have supper ready. What do you say?"

Biddy sighed. "All right Pop . . ."

The sun blazed down on the desert just as it had yesterday and would do tomorrow. Biddy sat on the dozing Buck and looked across the rocks at the place she'd first seen the doorway. It had taken a lot of courage to come back here after being so scared before and after nobody had believed her. They'd said there hadn't been any door at all—that she'd only been make-believing.

And maybe—just maybe—they had been right, because there wasn't any door there now.

Biddy urged Buck on up the slope. She went fearfully at first, then with more courage because everything looked very quiet and peaceful, really. Maybe the horrid people from the Eastern Bloc had realized how silly it was—trying to blow up our station—and had packed up and gone home. It wasn't scary at all now. Biddy urged Buck right up to the wall and he stood there with his eyes half-

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closed catching a nap. And that was good because you couldn't fool animals about people. If there had been anyone around, Buck would have known, all right.

"Hello, little girl."

A chill went through Biddy. Not the cold kind, the tickly kind, as she turned and saw the man. Buck turned and saw him too and then went back to sleep.

The speaker was a man and Biddy wondered how on earth she could have missed him. He was sitting on a rock beside the place the doorway had been and while Biddy wanted to be scared and thought she ought to be scared, she wasn't able to feel that way about the man at all.

He got up from his rock and stood there smiling at her. He was very tall—taller than Pop who was no shorty himself—and had a kind of yellow hair that was thick and curly. There seemed to be a shiny circle around the hair but then Biddy saw that was just the sun and the way the man was standing.

It was hard to say how old the man really was. He was about like Pop, but in some ways he seemed a lot younger than that and in some ways much older. It was very confusing. He was kind of slim but he had a lot of muscle too—probably the way Davey Crockett would look with his shirt off maybe.

Biddy raised one leg and the man said, "Need any help?"

"No—no I can make it all right."

"That horse seems to be built right to your size."

Biddy laughed. "Buck's not a horse."

"He's not? Or should I say she's not?"

This man was so funny. "Buck's a boy."

"Oh."

"And he's a burro, not a horse."

"Well what do you know about that? Can you imagine me calling him a horse? Will you pardon me?"

Biddy took a couple of steps toward the man, then stopped uncertainly. "I—are you—?"

"Why don't you come over here and sit down with me?"

"Is—is it all right?"

"I don't know why not."

"I thought maybe you were from the Eastern Bloc." That was foolish of course. Nobody as nice as this man could be from the horrid East.

"No. I'm not from there." The man's clear gray eyes were on Biddy's brace as she approached.

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"Then where are you from?"

That seemed to take a little thought. Well, let's say I'm from the sky bloc."

"There *is* a sky bloc?"

"Oh, yes. A very big big one. After all, the sky is very big isn't it?"

"Yes, that's right. But what are you doing here?"

That was obviously an even tougher one to answer. "Oh, I've got a little job to do."

"You aren't going to blow up our space station, are you?"

"No, that is, I hope not."

"You mean that maybe you will?"

The man's smile said everything was going to be all right and because little girls understood smiles and believed them even more than words, it wasn't necessary to go into the subject any further. "What's your name?"

The man said some funny word that Biddy couldn't understand. She laughed and he laughed too and then said, "Why don't you call me Joe? That's a nice easy name to remember."

"It's a nice name. Do you live in the cave there where the shiny box is?"

The smile left Joe's face. "You were inside the cave?"

"Yesterday. You left the door open."

"Yes. I'm staying there for a while." Joe changed the subject quickly. "What's the matter with your leg?"

"I had polio."

"Polio? You were sick?"

"Yes, I was very sick, but I didn't die, so I was very lucky. I only had my leg get so I can't use it."

"Only that, eh?" Joe mused and seemed intensely interested in the brace. "What a crude conception of efficiency," and when Biddy asked what? he said, "Oh nothing. May I look at that mehcanism?"

"You mean my brace?"

"Yes."

Biddy came close and the man concentrated on the brace. Except that Biddy thought he was more interested in her leg. His hands were very gentle and then he looked up suddenly and said, "How would you like to see the things I have inside the cave, child?"

"You can call me Biddy if you want to. My name is Ruth but Biddy's my nickname."

"It's a nice one. Let's go inside."

Joe had a small thing on his shirt and it was only when he reached up and touched it and the door of

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the cave swung open that Biddy noticed the peculiar way he was dressed. And it was strange, she thought, that she hadn't even seen the tight-fitting silver colored shirt and the pants that were silver too and almost like skin they were so tight to his legs. But even in noticing them now, Biddy didn't say anything because they really weren't strange at all. Not when Joe wore them.

Joe took her hand and led her into the cave. He said, "Now don't be afraid. None of this is made to hurt little girls."

"What's it for?"

"It's called a primary relay station."

"Like our space station?"

"No—not exactly. This station hasn't any guns. At least it hasn't the kind of guns you know about."

"I'm glad. I'm afraid of atom and hydroshells. They kill people and poison them and make them suffer."

"This station doesn't do that. It reaches out into space and brings in all kinds of power. It's a magnet, you might say."

"What are you going to do with the power you bring in, Joe?"

"Now that's a very interesting question." Joe smiled. "Maybe we'll tickle little girls with it."

Biddy laughed. "You're just joking with me."

"No, I'm not. Tell you what we'll do. Suppose I give you a little sample?"

"That would be fun."

Joe seemed to be wondering about the machine in the cave with one part of his mind and talking to Biddy with the other. Not wondering exactly, but kind of like Pop when he tried to rig the jeep up to pull the big rock out of the backyard by just turning the back wheels. Pop had done it too. He was smart about making things do the things they hadn't been built to do and Joe looked as though he was trying to do the same thing with his machine.

Joe said, "Why don't you sit right here, Biddy—on this chair. Then we'll take this wire and fasten it there—so—and this one, here."

The wires were very shiny and Biddy thought they must be silver or maybe platinum. Joe gave her one to hold in her left hand and she asked, "When does the tickle start?"

"Right away now." Joe sat down in front of a board covered with switches and dials and studied for a while.

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Then he said, "Close your eyes, Biddy, and imagine you're far up in the sky—that Buck has wings and he's carrying you clear over the mountains. Just think that and don't open your eyes."

Biddy closed her eyes tight and imagined Buck with great big wings and she laughed in her mind because the wings were bigger than Buck was and he looked back at them and stamped his feet. But they worked and she felt Buck lift her right off the ground and up into the sky. They were really flying.

They sailed ever so far over the desert and over the purple mountains Pop said he'd take her to see some day. It was very peaceful and cool so high up in the air and such a funny feeling in her body. As though going up in the sky was really waking up and like all the people down on the ground were really asleep. So much warmth and feeling and tingely happiness came into her legs and arms and body that she could hardly hold it all. Hardly hold it all —hardly hold it . . .

"Wake up, Biddy."

Biddy opened her eyes. She was still sitting in the chair but all the wires were gone and Joe was standing there looking down at her and smiling. Biddy said, "Oh, I must have taken a nap."

"That's right. It was good for you. And now you'd better get along home or your parents will be worried about you."

"Why don't you come with me? You can have supper with us."

"Not tonight, Biddy. Some other time."

Biddy got up and they walked hand in hand to where Buck was waiting, Joe walking very slow because with her brace Biddy couldn't go very fast. Joe lifted her onto Buck and she waved good-bye as they went down the slope and away from the rocks. She waved again just as Joe and the cave and the wall went out of sight. She was sorry to see him disappear.

She got home a little late—Pop was already home—and Mom was cross. Mom said, "Biddy, if you stay away like this again, I'll just take that burro away from you."

Biddy knew Mom wouldn't of course, but it scared her just the same and she didn't say anything about Joe. That was just as well, she thought as she washed up for supper. Mom and Pop didn't believe about the cave so they would not believe about Joe either

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and the nice ride up in the sky on Buck.

Pop was already at the table when Biddy came in and Mom was sitting down. Biddy hobbled across the room and Pop looked up and said, "You mustn't be late again, Biddy."

"I won't Pop."

Pop had looked back down at his food. Then he jerked his eyes up sharply and back to Biddy as she came to her chair and pulled it out and sat down.

Mom was putting potatoes on Biddy's plate and Pop just sat there and stared at her, motionless. He didn't say anything or do anything and finally Mom said, "Dan—what on earth's gotten into you? Something wrong with the meat?"

Pop laid his fork down and said, "Get up, Biddy."

"What, Pop?"

"I said, get up."

"But Pop, I didn't mean to be late. Don't take Buck away from me—please."

Pop frowned and made an impatient motion with his hand. "Oh, stop it! Just get up and walk around the table and let me look at you."

Mom was looking at Pop kind of puzzled as Biddy got up and did as she'd been told. Pop bent over and looked at her brace and her leg. He ran his hand over her leg, his frown getting deeper and his face more bewildered.

Suddenly he picked Biddy up and carried her into the bedroom and laid her on the bed. Without saying a word, he began unbuckling the brace and he was just lifting it away when Mom came in.

Mom said, "Dan—have you lost your mind?"

Pop gave her a quick, almost savage look and then turned back to Biddy. He picked Biddy up and put her on her feet and said, "Now I want you to walk over to the dresser."

Mom said, "Dan! For heaven's sake."

Pop barked back fiercely. "Can't you see it? Are you blind? Her leg's thicker and bigger. It isn't shorter than the other one anymore!"

Then Biddy walked straight over to the dresser as though there had never been anything wrong with her leg at any time in her short life. She touched the dresser and then took her hand away and laughed and walked back.

Pop bellowed, "Can't you see? *Her leg's healed.*"

And Mom let out a kind of strangled cry and fainted dead away on the bed . . .

Dan Parker sat on a chair

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facing the lounge where Biddy sat close beside Jane. Dan leaned forward and said, "Now just once more, baby—tell us what the man did."

Jane said, "Dan! The child's exhausted. She's told us everything she knows."

"She might have missed something. He had some sort of a diathermy machine in this cave?"

"What's diathermy, Pop?"

"Never mind that. He fastened some wires from this machine to your leg and after a while you went to sleep. Can't you remember anything else?"

Biddy yawned. "Nothing except he was very nice and said he came from the sky bloc."

Jane lifted Biddy in her arms. "I'm going to put her to bed. Nothing can be done until morning anyhow. Poor baby!"

Dan sat staring at the wall until Jane returned. She came and laid a hand on his shoulder and he looked up and his thoughts were suddenly arrested. It was as though Jane had dropped years from her age. The old glow was in her eyes—a soft wonder—a new happiness.

The realization impressed him but was lost to the new anxiety that was swiftly rising in his mind. Jane said, "Isn't it wonderful, darling? I can't understand it, but I've seen Biddy's leg and—and I don't care how it happened. I don't care if the man in the hills is true or a part of her imagination. The cure is real—*real*—and I've never been so happy."

"I think he's genuine—he has to be—and tomorrow we'll find out about him. But—"

"But what, Dan?"

"I was just thinking—"

Jane sat down on his knee and put an arm around his shoulders. "Dan—you don't seem too happy about it. I don't understand why—"

Dan Parker looked at his wife and said, "There's another angle to it, Jane."

"Another angle?"

"If there is such a man as Biddy describes and he cured her deformity, then he can cure the deformities of others, too."

Jane was puzzled. "I suppose that's true."

"He could cure young Davey Taber."

"Wouldn't that be wonderful?"

"I suppose so, but then Davey will take over the foreman's job at the Circle-7—my job."

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Janey got up from her husband's knee. There was horror in her look. "Dan, do you mean you'd let so small a thing as that influence you in—?"

Dan Parker sprang up also. "Small? You know we could not get along on a cow hand's salary. We'd starve to death. And I'm no good for anything but ranch work. It's all I know!"

"Dan—please!"

He turned suddenly contrite — somewhat ashamed, but in a way, he stuck to his guns. "Sure—I suppose it's rotten of me to think that way, but I've got you and Biddy to provide for. You two are my responsibility. It may not mean anything to you having people say Dan Parker can't support his family, but it means a lot to me!"

Jane looked at him quietly for a long moment before she said, "Dan, I—I just haven't any words. What you're thinking is almost evil—the way you feel about this—but I can't think of a logical answer or argument to show you where you're wrong. The thing's just — just beyond words."

Dan dropped to the lounge and sat staring at the floor. "I guess I'm a pretty rotten individual."

Jane spoke quietly. "The only thing I can say, darling is that we'll always get along. We always have."

"Well, I can't do anything about it anyhow. Let's go to bed."

"Of course. You'll feel better in the morning, Dan. By that time you'll realize what's actually happened. Biddy's been made whole. There's been a miracle, darling!"

"That's right — a miracle . . ."

Biddy awoke very early. There was a funny little fluttery fear inside her and she lay for a while trying to find out what it was. There wasn't anything to be afraid of—nothing she could think of. Nobody had—

She sat up and moved both her legs off the bed and put her feet on the floor. Then she remembered that her left one was all right again and she forgot all about hunting for where the fear came from. She was too completely happy to worry about it.

She got out of bed and dressed and tiptoed through the living room, being very quiet. When she got outside there was a faint streak of dawn in the east and she almost laughed aloud at the wonderful feeling that came

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from the cool, sharp morning air, the dead predawn stillness, and not having to hobble along with the old brace on her leg.

Buck flopped his ears and seemed a little annoyed at having to get up so early but he finally agreed to come out of the corral and take Biddy up to the ridges. Even without any breakfast, so Biddy knew that regardless of his seeming sullenness he felt pretty good too.

Biddy didn't quite get out of town unseen. There was someone else up early too. Cecil Bates came slowly up the main street and as Buck approached him it was light enough for him to look at Biddy and say, "Wait a minute, honey. You forgot something."

"Good morning, Mr. Bates. No, I don't think so."

"Your brace, Biddy. How in hades did you get on that burro without it?"

"Oh, I don't need it any more. A man fixed my leg yesterday."

"A who—did what?"

"A very nice man up in the hills. He has a shiny box and he had me hold some wires and now my leg is all healed up again."

"What man are you talking about?"

"He has a cave up there. At first I thought he was from the Eastern Bloc and was one of our enemies. But he's from space or somewhere and he's very good."

Cecil Bates stared at Biddy's leg and then came close and put his hands on it. Biddy didn't like that very much and she kicked a heel into Buck's ribs and said, "I've got to go now, Mr. Bates. It's going to be a very nice day isn't it? Good-bye."

She rode away leaving the sheriff standing wide-eyed in the middle of the street with his mouth open. As she moved out of town she looked back uneasily, the nameless fear nagging at her again. She had the feeling of having done or said something wrong but she wasn't sure what.

The east brightened into fresh dawn as Buck pattered along toward the ridges. Biddy had never been up so early before and she thought it was wonderful but her happiness was dampened a little by the fact that she'd gone off without asking Mom. That was wrong, she thought, and maybe Mom would be angry. But Biddy's thoughts were mainly occupied with wondering why she had done it. She hadn't consciously wanted to deceive

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Mom, but something she could not really understand had made her sneak off so quietly.

The same thing that made her uneasy about telling Mr. Bates what had happened. Then the ridges were close and she could see the rocks and the place the doorway should be. The door was closed and Biddy guessed that Joe didn't get up very early either.

She rode as close as she could and was just about to call out his name when a pair of hands lifted her and swung her off Buck and set her on her feet. And Joe was saying, "Hello there, youngster. Up pretty early aren't you?"

Biddy wasn't even frightened at his appearing that way from nowhere. At least that was how he had seemed to appear. She said, "I woke up and I wanted to come out and thank you for fixing my leg."

"That wasn't necessary."

"Have you had breakfast?"

"Not yet. I was up early too and I was just sitting out here doing some thinking."

"Are you expecting to eat breakfast soon?"

"Right now as a matter of fact. You wait. I'll bring it out."

Joe touched the small thing on his shirt. The cave door opened and he went inside and came out very shortly with a tray that he set down on a rock.

Biddy looked at the tray and said, "That's awfully funny food."

"Funny?"

"Uh-huh. It doesn't look like any kind I ever saw before."

"Well you just try it and see if you don't like it."

Biddy picked up one of the little white sticks and bit off an end. She chewed it warily, then with relish. "It's very good. Where did you get it?"

"I brought it with me."

They ate in silence for a while, then Joe said, "Biddy, what do your mother and father think of the Eastern Bloc?"

Biddy looked up in surprise. "Why they hate it of course. Everybody hates the Eastern Bloc because they're mean and cruel."

"What do the people of your town expect to happen?"

"With the Eastern Bloc?"

"Yes."

"Everybody knows we'll have to fight them someday. We built a space station and so they had to go and build one too and they want to wreck our station so they'll have the only one. And when

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they do the big war will start."

"And I suppose the Eastern Bloc knows you want to wreck their space station?"

"Why they can't think that because we had one first and we could have stopped them from building one but we didn't because we aren't mean like they are."

"I see." Joe thought that over very carefully for a long time and then all the food on the tray was gone and Biddy said, "What's the sky bloc like, Joe?"

"The sky bloc?"

"That's where you said you came from."

"Oh, yes. Well, it's a little hard to describe. It's very big and I think probably you'd like it if you ever went there."

"Did they send you away?"

"Not exactly. They sent me down here to do something."

"What do you have to do?"

"I have to talk to some people."

"What people do you have to talk to?"

"I'm not quite sure yet. I haven't made up my mind."

"When will you make up your mind?"

Joe considered Biddy's questions gravely as though each one was very important. "I'm not quite sure. That machine in the cave isn't just to make little girl's legs well. It does other things. It tunes in on thought waves just the way your television set tunes in on pictures."

"You mean it tells you what people are thinking about?"

"In a way, it does. And after a while I'll look at the things the machine has recorded and then I'll decide what I have to do or say."

There was silence while Biddy's mind went off on another track. Pretty soon she said, "Joe, there's a boy named Davey—well, he isn't a boy, really, he's almost a man—and his leg is like mine was. He can't walk on it either."

"Does he live in Sage Bend?"

"No. He lives on the ranch where my Pop works. I think it would be awfully nice if you fixed his leg too."

"Perhaps I can."

Biddy clapped her hands and looked at Joe through bright eyes. "I think you're wonderful, Joe—just wonderful—and there's old Mr. Haney. He's blind, so maybe you could—"

Joe laughed. "Now wait a minute, Biddy. I'm no miracle man. I can't reconstruct people's minds."

"But Mr. Haney's mind is

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fine. It's just his eyes that are no good."

"I'm afraid you're wrong about that."

"Do you know Mr. Haney?"

"Not exactly. I've wandered around a little and I met him while he was taking a walk."

"Then you know how bad it is to be blind."

"Yes, but you don't understand, Biddy. I wouldn't be helping Mr. Haney. I'd be hurting him."

"Hurting him?"

"Yes. Mr. Haney is far happier the way he is than if he had his sight back. With his eyes functioning he'd be just like anyone else."

"That's what he wants."

"No he doesn't. Being blind makes him different and he's grown to depend on that difference as a staff of comfort. He lives on the sympathy he gets from people who can see. Mr. Haney doesn't know it himself but he would be very miserable if we gave him back his sight. As I said, Biddy, I can't change people's minds. I'm no miracle man."

"That's what Mom and Pop said happened to me. A miracle. Was that right, Joe?"

"No Biddy. You see where I come from we're a little further ahead in some scientific developments than the people down here. The expansion and reconstruction of bone and tissue isn't very difficult when you know how and have the right sonic frequencies to work with."

"I see," Biddy answered gravely although she didn't see at all. "But what about Davey Taber? He doesn't really want to be crippled does he?"

"I doubt it. Maybe we'll have a chance to see. . ."

The town of Sage Bend was in an uproar. The crowd—if the few dozen persons who resided there could be called a crowd—were milling in front of Dan Parker's house. They had seen some excitment and wanted to see more.

It had started before dawn with Cecil Bates standing alone in the street, watching Biddy ride off. When she had gone beyond his sight, his confusion and consternation fused into a clear-cut thought. He'd be triply damned if that heel Dan Parker hadn't been playing on the sympathy of the town all this time.

Ever since Biddy had been brought back from the hospital in Phoenix. Could you beat it? Putting a brace on a kid's leg and making her wear it around town so people around

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town would be sorry for him. But why? What end did it serve?

Then Cecil knew. Not the townspeople. Of course not. Sam Taber was the target of Dan's rotten plan. Who'd ever think a man would be so scared of his job he'd make his own daughter act a cripple in order to keep it?

Well, he wouldn't get away with it any longer. Cecil fairly vibrated with the importance he felt within himself at having come upon this secret. He'd show this town. So they thought he was just a slob who sat in front of the jailhouse all day, did they? Just a bouncer to take drunks out of the tavern and sober them up behind bars. He'd show them they had to get up pretty early to get the wool over Cecil Bates' eyes and keep it there.

Nick Sanford was just coming down to open his lunch counter in case any late drinkers wanted an early cup of coffee. Cecil hurried in that direction. Nick unlocked the door and said, "Hi, Ceec. Up early ain't you?"

"Early enough to find out what's been going on around here."

"Something happen?"

"Your damn tootin' something's been happening. Met the little Parker girl riding out on her burro."

"So early? Where was she going?"

"Not important. The important thing was she didn't have her leg brace on."

"Come on in while I make coffee."

Bates followed Nick inside and said, "Didn't you hear me? I said she didn't have her leg brace on."

"Why not?"

"Because she didn't need it. She's never needed it. Her leg's as good as yours or mine."

"You must be joking."

"Did I ever joke, Nick?" Cecil asked tonelessly.

Nick had to concede that one. In all the time he'd owned the lunch room, he'd never seen Cecil Bates smile or say a light word. "What did Biddy have to say about it?"

"Oh, she had some gobberish about a man up in the hills making her leg well. Something Dan probably told her to say if she ever got caught."

"That doesn't seem logical. About Dan I mean. I can see why—"

Cecil laid out his ideas on the subject and Nick shook his head. "Can't hardly go along with you on that. Don't

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figure it makes sense somehow."

"Gimme a cup of that coffee, will you?"

"Okay. So you think it's just been a masquerade all the time?"

"What other answer is there? A spindly, pipe-stem little leg doesn't grow normal overnight."

"But we saw Biddy's deformed leg. All of us."

"I got that figured out too."

"Then tell me."

"Illusion," Cecil said wisely. "A kind of optical illusion. We see a girl limping with a big brace on her leg. We really don't look any further than that. We take it for granted the legs bad. That's human nature, Nick."

Sanford didn't seem entirely convinced but he didn't argue the point. "Well, now that you know, what are you going to do about it?"

"Do about it? I'm going down there and expose that rat. After pulling a slimy trick like that he should be held up for everybody to take a look at."

"I don't know. I'd go a little easy if I were you."

Cecil's native caution perked up at the warning but he found a virtue with which to defend his position. "I'd just be doing my duty—the duty of any citizen. And I'm not going down there to accuse him. I'm just going to ask him about it. I'll keep a completely open mind and listen to what he has to say, the damned rat."

Two men entered the lunchroom after coffee and when they'd heard Cecil's story they didn't think much of the "man in the hills" yarn either. In fact, they didn't think at all. As one whispered to the other, "I don't know what the hell this is all about but Ceec is on his horse and there might be some excitement so let's stick around."

The other one yawned. "This stinking town could certainly use some."

Another hour went by before the town really started gathering. Then, with what amounted to a holiday spirit, heightened by the aura of mystery involved, the crowd followed Cecil Bates up the street to Dan Parker's bungalow. And the closer they came, the greater was Cecil Bates' sense of self-importance. Without analyzing, he knew he was happier than he'd been in many years. This was the way a sheriff should act—how the job should be. Walking up the street to investigate rascality with the

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town coming respectfully along behind. They were depending on him and he wouldn't let them down . . .

Dan Parker was finishing his breakfast. He scowled into his coffee and said, "What did she have to pull a trick like this for? If she doesn't get back I'll have to go look for her. I'll be late to work."

"Why should you have to do that?" Jane asked. "She knows the country. There's nothing to hurt her. She has Buck with her."

"Jane, sometimes I don't understand you. Your own kid wandering around in the desert and it doesn't bother you."

"I don't think it bothers you either. You're more worried about being inconvenienced—being late to work."

"Now listen here—!"

"Oh, Dan! Let's not fight. It makes me a little sick to fight now. Don't you realize that last night something wonderful happened? Something we don't understand but wonderful all the same. Biddy was healed—and here we are the next morning growling at each other like a cat and a dog." Jane ignored the fact that Dan was doing all the growling and added, "Besides, I'm sure she's all right. I—I feel it somehow."

"You *feel* it! You've gotten almighty sensitive—"

Dan—please—" Jane stopped suddenly caught by the sound of pounding feet—the rumble of the crowd. "Someone's coming."

They went out on the front porch and saw the townspeople swarming into the front yard. Cecil Bates was in the forefront with fat little Tom Schultz, the mayor of Sage Bend beside him.

Jane's hand were gripped tight together and her heart was a dead weight in her breast. "What's happened? What's the matter? Have you found Biddy?"

"No, we ain't, Mrs. Parker," Bates said, then turned his words on Dan. "This morning I saw her riding that burro out of town. And I saw something else. She wasn't crippled at all. Never has been. Now we want to know what kind of a shenanigan you're pulling, Dan Parker! Let's have it straight."

Jane said, "It's true—it's true that Biddy's leg has been healed but it was done yesterday by—"

"I know. She gave me that story about a man up in the ridges—something Dan told

(Continued on page 110)

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WORLD OF WOMEN

By HARLAN ELLISON

No man could get within half a light-year of Arka III. But the defenses had to be breeched—not by an army, but by one male named Aaron Deems. And he was so clever about it that when he got there, the lady sentry might well have said, "Dearie, your petticoat's on crooked."

THEY told me I'd have a better chance using a single-seat scouter, so I put up the beef that I couldn't get the lifeshell into the scouter; space was cramped in one of those jobs. So they shot back with the answer that I could tow it along behind me. I didn't care much for that, but it appeared to be the only way out, so I took it.

They snapped me into the scouter, a half light-year out. from Arka III, and went back into the control shack. I sat there for five minutes, while the giant SpaceCom dreadnaught around me maneuvered herself into the light of Arka. That way they were blocked from sight by the inner planets. Then the compboard bleeped and they told me the launcher was ready.

I took a quick look behind the ship, saw the perfect replica of a woman, fastened by triple chains to the upper arms, lying out full-length on the launching rack. I hoped the acceleration into space wouldn't rip any of the seams open.

Damn if the thing didn't look almost alive: long-legged, brassy blonde hair, blue eyes, high-breasted and flat-stomached. And once inside it, that lifeshell would be like a second skin to me.

Probably the only thing besides my wits that would keep me alive on the planet of women—Arka III.

I turned back to the compboard and flicked the speaker on. "Deems here.

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She stood at bay, facing hooded horror.

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Everything set. Bolted down and ready to snap. Over and out."

I heard the metallic voice of Tessler, head of SpaceCom Field Operations, in the squawk-box over my right ear. "Don't forget Aaron, you have to find out who sent us the call, and which one is the maniac. That's important, that's your job . . . but try and get back whole. There's a stack of missions waiting on my desk, and we're short of Operatives." There was a grin in his voice, only half-disguising the steel-edged meaning of the words.

"Over and out. Luck, boy."

The squawk-box clicked with finality, and the petcocks at the front of the launching rack opened quickly, the air sighing into space puffily. Then the launching rack doors slid open like gigantic eyelids, and I was staring face-full into the searing red light of Arka.

I slapped the filters down across the bubble, and it dimmed out the red dwarf only partially. I didn't have time to worry about it any further, because I felt the tighteners in the launching rack grip . . . heard the click of their settling locked . . . and then the roar of the launcher pile-driving in behind me. A fragmenting instant later the launcher grabbed the little scoutship by the seat of its pants and heaved it out the front of the SpaceCom dreadnaught, into the diamond-dusted black of deep space.

The lifeshell tugged at the rear of the ship, but I felt it only distantly. The acceleration shoved me back into the webbing, and my face was yanked out of shape in a second. I greyed out, and let the world flicker into a wavering nothing around me.

When I snapped back awake, the dreadnaught had slipped through into inverspace, leaving nothing but a bright blue smudge of distorted space. It was gone; back to Earth. And I was alone.

On a possible death-mission to a world of women.

On the trip down, I had time to rummage back through my recent memories and re-play the events that had brought me to this point in space.

Arka III had been a nice, quiet agricultural planet, exporting a nice breed of egg-tomatoes, syntho-spin-

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ach, and *yawka* root, till a year before. The planet was a little heavy on the matriarchy side, with the women outnumbering the men by two-to-one, but still pleasant (or *more* pleasant, if your mind ran along those lines). The government was set up in a pyramid fashion with the Five at its apex. The Five were the only ones to whom the anti-death drugs had been administered, expensive and rare as they are, and they ruled the planet alone, for five hundred years.

The Five were the oldest women on Arka III, and they did a fine job. The planet functioned smoothly, and remained at peace with its neighbors.

But some time several years before, for no reason at all, communication with Arka III was severed totally. The attempts at trade or information-getting were met with the strictest sort of rebuke. Then, a few months before, the first skirmish raids had begun.

Armored women, riding their ships like the men that had colonized the outer worlds, descended on Tulla, Jeequaz, Roosevelt IV, Tenspot and Lllaylllor. The raids had wiped out all the centers of population on each world, and when tentative word had been received in Galactic Center, in the SpaceCom headquarters, it was apparent that the women of Arka III were holding those worlds as conquests.

No attempts at intervention were successful. Thirteen different Operatives had been sent into Arka III's atmosphere, and none had come back.

Then, one month before, a coded message had come in to SpaceCom. It had read: ONE OF THE FIVE HAS BEEN WARPED BY THE EFFECTS OF HER IMMORTALITY DRUGS/SHE IS INSANE FOR CONQUEST/ALL THE MALES HAVE BEEN KILLED/A MALE AGENT CANNOT SUCCEED BUT WE NEED HELP DESPERATELY BEFORE SHE KILLS US ALL OR THROWS THE GALAXY INTO CHAOS/SEND HELP AT ONCE/MY FOUR SISTERS ARE

The message had come through painfully, over a period of several days, in snatches, as though the message-sender were doing it under surveillance. It had not been signed. Whether because of intention, or because the warped Sister had

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discovered the communication-system, it was not completed.

And Aaron Deems had been selected to invade Arka III's soil, to track down the warped Sister among the Five. That was me.

They had known I couldn't make it as a man, so the lifeshell creators of Cits XII had been employed to mold me the lifeshell of a woman. In which I could safely move about the planet, and find my informant, and through her —end the career of conquest of the warped Sister.

It was as rugged an operation as I'd ever been handed, and ten years in the SpaceCom have handed me some odd ones. Walking around as a woman, with the hypnoburied movements and reasonings of a woman, was going to be a strange experience.

I might have laughed at the ridiculousness of it all . . . if I hadn't known this was for keeps.

I'd seen tri-V clips of the rubble left of Lllyalllor. Eight billion men, women and children had met with flaming death on that raid, and I knew it was no joke, combating the diseased mind that had turned a planet of farming females into a world of bloodthirsty killers. No one in the Galaxy was safe, till the warped Sister was located . . .

. . . and put out of the way.

That was my job, and I suddenly had the chill fear, as my scouter dragged that lifeshell toward the crimson bulk of Arka III, that I might fail. I had never considered failure before, but this seemed a problem beyond my scope.

I was worried, and worse, I was damned scared.

Those tri-V clips had not been pretty.

Their telesonar picked me up while I was still cruising high. My activators clicked, and I knew they had their beams on me, tracking me carefully. And for a while, no interceptors came up from the planet.

I knew I couldn't fight it out with them; the scouter was just too small, and with that lifeshell tagging along behind, my maneuverability was cut to nothing. And I couldn't take a chance on them blasting up the shell, anyhow. I had to let the plane accelerate. I had to ditch the scouter fast.

I threw the stick down, and the gyros sent the scouter into a silent dive, straight

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for the blood-red bulk of Arka III.

As the planet grew big in my conning bubble, surrounding me with a crimson glow, I got a glimpse of the world's curve, stretched like a paper cut-out, above me.

Then the atmosphere came up to meet me, the gyros took hold, there was an "up" and a "down" . . . and I was going down. The scouter heeled off to the right, the chains attached to the lifeshell grabbed air, and the drag was terrific. I was thinking of easing up, making a conventional spiral-slide planetfall, and almost eased the stick back.

Then I caught a horizon-glimpse, and saw a scramble of interceptors — sleek-bodied, silverfish, and deadly— rising up to meet me. I knew I couldn't ease back, or they'd blow me out of the sky.

The scouter ripped air, with a whine like a million pulled-apart drive chambers, and nosed straight down. I passed the covey of interceptors with a good hundred and fifty miles to spare, and plowed through a cloudbank, losing myself.

By the time they could get their radar on me, I'd be gone. And I was already below telesonar range from Arka Center.

For the time being, I was safe. Now all I had to do was land the damned scouter, make sure it wouldn't be found, get into that lifeshell, and play female indefinitely. Did I say *all!*

Things were shaping up. Not nicely, but steadily.

As it turned out, I needn't have worried about camouflaging the scouter. I had deadsticked the ship so hard, it burned out the casings on the power-pile, and half a mile up the jets misfired, sputtered and died. I went into a tight spin, and had to use the jectorseat to throw me out. I had taken the precaution of dragging in the lifeshell — after jettisoning the conning bubble—so when the ejector went *spung!* it was thrown up and out, the pliant body hugged tight as death to my chest.

When the seat yanked loose and the mijit-shute billowed at my back, I was still clutching her to me. I settled down nicely, and watched above me, then in front of me, then below me, as the scouter spun and wavered, finally taking a snaking spin into the ocean. It was gone in a few moments. Not even

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a plume of smoke. Neat, and final.

I came down in a tree, on an island—or what I supposed was an island. I had been briefed on the continent layout of Arka III, and supposed I was on one of the little keys adjoining the main continent. The scouter had gone down into the Western Sea.

It was hell getting out of the shute harness, but after fifteen minutes of struggling I shucked it off, and did a good imitation of an orangutan, as I clambered down from the feathery-leafed tree.

The lifeshell was untouched, except for a few tree-smudges on arms, belly and forehead.

I took a sprint into a stand of deep underbrush, just in case those interceptors had followed the scouter down, and finding soft soil, buried the shute harness in a shallow trough.

Then I left the lifeshell, took a fast dip in the sparklingly cool waters offshore to clean away the upper layers of epidermis—using a mild abrasive from my dopkit—and got ready to slip inside the female lifeshell.

First I sprayed adhesivtalc inside the shell, and over my entire body. Some of it got in my eyes, and they stung badly for a moment. Then it wore away, and I knew I was ready.

I pressed the sealing-point in the lifeshell's upper inner leg, right at the trunk-joint, and it fell into two segments. I fitted them around me, just as I would a skin-tight suit of clothing.

Before I slipped on the other half, though, I took a quick look in the make-up mirror from my dopkit, just to remember what I looked like.

Aaron Deems, SpaceCom operative, with flaming red hair, brown eyes, a facefull of freckles, a bull neck and continual beard-shadow. Then I put on the other half of the lifeshell.

It compressed me, and fluffed me. It padded me and enclosed me. It fitted like skintights for an instant, then even that was gone; it was my second skin. No matter where they touched, I'd feel it. They could torture me, and the pain would be as great as if they were really doing it to my own skin. I could see, hear, feel, touch, taste and breath as easily as if the lifeshell weren't around me.

The lifeshell creators of

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Cits XII are mastermen, and geniuses of this particular form of construction. Many believe they have tapped the life-source of the universe. I couldn't say; all I can vouch for is that with one of their lifeshells on me, I was a woman. Not a man masquerading as a woman . . . but a woman in the flesh. The lifeshell creators had been doing this sort of work for centuries, but it was such a specialized craft, with such little demand, and the Cits Cluster was so far out, their work had remained relatively unknown.

SpaceCom used these lifeshells often, but the evidence of their existence was so slight, that few people actually realized such a thing as a lifeshell existed.

I took out the flattened clothing from the dopkit, and let it inflate itself. I put on the form-fitting knee-length shorts, the tight body-brassiere, and the ornamental coat-cloak. I had a bit of trouble with the shoes—they were buckled oddly, as most women's shoes are.

But in a few minutes I was dressed, and looked into the mirror a second time. Aaron Deems was gone. I was a tall, long-legged blonde, with blue eyes, a startling figure, and the thoughts of a man running around inside my head.

I had to watch that. It could trip me up. So I decided to follow through the rest of the set-up, the way the SpaceCom Preparation Section had planned it.

They had hypno-buried the basic, broad ways of female thought and speech, in my brain-centers. I remembered the phrase they had told me to say, to release the data, and I said it. "Hell hath no fury like a woman shorn."

And the next instant I could feel a cool tide of strange thoughts bubbling up out of my brainpan like whipped cream in a squeeze-bottle. I began to *feel* like a woman, and when I tried to analyze the situation again, I found my observations and ideas colored by an unfamiliar sort of reasoning. My original, male, thoughts were not removed, or submerged, they were merely laid beside these *other* thoughts, and I had a dual picture of what was happening.

"Now I know what I would have been like, had I been born a woman," I muttered, and was shocked to hear my voice. Not the tremulous baritone I had grown up with, but a delicate,

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slightly throaty, completely musical soprano. I was, indeed, a woman.

"What a Hypno-Freudian Psychman could do with *this* situation!" I mumbled, tossing everything back into the dopkit. The only thing I held out was my triple-thread blastick and a tiny bottle of decoagulator . . . in case I had to get rid of this lifeshell in a hurry. As a second thought, I pulled out my structuralizer. It might come in handy.

Then I buried the dopkit, too.

That done, I had to figure a way of getting off the island, onto the mainland, and on the track of the warped Sister. My briefing about Arka III's culture had necessarily been sketchy: there hadn't been time, after all the hypno burying, and what was more important . . . nothing was known of how Arka III had changed since the warped Sister began getting her way.

So I wasn't at all sure that a pack of headhunting, cannibalistic females might not come bounding out of the brush at any moment. The thought put a shiver down my back—both my backs—so I started walking.

I decided the smartest way to do it would be to walk the perimeter of the island, keeping a few feet inside the foliage line, but in sight of the beach. That way I could assay anything of value, and still not be seen from the air.

I started walking, finding I wore the lifeshell with ease and comfort. It was odd, of course, feeling the wind blowing my long blonde hair about my face, and the difference in weight distribution along my frame; but in all, it was as though I were a woman.

And the lifeshell was good support, kept me from tiring as fast. In five hours I'd walked the island, the footprints in the red sands I'd made when I started, meeting me back at my starting point.

The jungle grew in lush yellow and blue profusion. Touches of green were spattered across the foliage, also, showing a strange multi-colored chlorophyll worked in the plants. Once, a huge, white-winged bird with bright yellow markings slanted down from the blazing sky, dove into the trees amid a flacking of ripped leaves, and was silent.

But the island was not si-

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lent. A million twitterings, scratchings, trumpetings and clickings reverberated from the jungle.

Still there was no other land-mass in sight. The island was obviously not a key, as I'd concluded. It appeared my mission was bogged down, almost before it had started.

Which suddenly struck me oddly. An outfit as competent as SpaceCom, planning, planning, never leaving very much to chance, to throw me down here, without locomotion, was more than just strange. It was damn unnatural, and it set me thinking: they must have known there would be some way for me to get where I had to get, no matter *where* I landed. But what was it?

Why hadn't I been told?

It didn't figure, but I couldn't spend much more time worrying about it, because night was closing in fast. I had to get myself sheltered and warm, before those things that cackled and roared in the jungle went looking for dinner.

I gathered together a huge mound of the lacey moss clouding the ground, and struck it alight with sparks from two rocks. I was beginning to feel very much like a frontiersman . . . uh, frontiers*woman*.

I pulled down a dozen dry branches from the mossy-topped trees, and built a lean-to. Covering it with more of the moss was a simple matter, and the whole preparation took me less than an hour.

Then I settled down to sleep, with the moss burning slowly and cracklingly, and strange dreams floating through my head.

The dreams were of five sticks, stuck in the ground. One of them was bent and twisted. Warped.

And somehow, I couldn't put my hands on that stick.

My sleep was lousy, and exceedingly troubled.

The next morning, the dreams materialized.

All night long I had been having vague, formless nightmares about the five Sisters, and about a water-scouter waiting at the ocean's edge, with a moisture-proof packet in the control compartment. In that packet were identification papers, directions for getting to the mainland, and information about the situation on Arka III.

The dreams had been repetitious, and had broken in the early morning only be-

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cause the moss had died out, and the island cold seeped to me.

I woke up, and got to my feet stiffly. The chill of sleeping on moss and soil had tightened my body terrifically. I walked slowly, sleepily, to the water's edge, and kneeled down, ducking my face into the briney scarlet water. Just before my face plunged in, I caught a glimpse of myself, and was shocked. I was a woman. My lean, crewcut head was a mass of blonde hair. Silky and whispering. Then the events of the day before rushed back to me, and the shock wore away to numbness.

I was washing the stickiness from my eyes when I heard the water slapping against the metal sides of the scouter. I looked up slowly, hardly believing it, but the dream *had* materialized.

The waterscouter was anchored by a borechain at the ocean's edge, and from where I kneeled, I could see the clear plastic of the packet, lying on the control console.

I got to my feet feeling even number than before. Someone had been on the island the night before, and I'd slept through the visitation. That person had left me a means of transportation, information (I was certain, of course, that the dream had been correct, and the packet did indeed contain identification and directions), and hypno-buried an awareness of the scene. Now I was armed with directions.

But why hadn't the person wakened me? Why had these things been left? Why hadn't guards been summoned, and myself placed under arrest? Was this what SpaceCom had known would happen when I landed, no matter where I landed?

The questions chased each other crystally around the inside of my skull, finally coming to rest on one solution.

Whoever it was, she was a friend. That was apparent: if it had been an enemy, I would be dead. And whoever it was, it had been SpaceCom's informant. Why she didn't want me to know who she was . . . that was something I'd have to find out later.

I started toward the waterscouter, and stopped. I remembered my blaster and the structuralizer I'd left in the lean-to.

When I'd retrieved them, I went aboard the sleek,

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needle-nosed waterscouter, and opened the packet.

The papers identified me (with accurate physical description) as Leona Francha. The blank which said "occupation" was *left* blank. For which I was grateful. I had yet to find out how Arka III was functioning, and my work had to be flexible enough to allow me roaming time.

There were also course-computer punchings, to get me to the mainland, I supposed. I *had* to trust them, they were all I had. There was also a note stuck in between two of the course-comp punch-tapes. It was from SpaceCom's mysterious informant, and it read:

"These papers and the boat have been left by a trusted agent of mine. Nowhere on them will you find a clue to my identity. It is better that way. When the time comes, you will know me. Your ship was tracked by radar, and was seen falling into the Western, but I arranged to have the reports sidetracked and deadened. So, in effect, no one but myself knows you are on Arka III. I wish you success, and warn you that the person you seek is ruthless."

It was unsigned, and I read it through again. Abruptly, it began to grow warm in my fingers. Even as I watched it, the paper charred at the edges. Then a tiny tower of flame leaped up, and I dropped the paper. In an instant it was worthless charred scrap, the wind tossing and carrying it.

Whoever had sent me help, and that note, for some reason didn't want me to know who she was. Whether out of fear of her warped Sister, or some other reason, I now had *two* people to find: the warped Sister, and the SpaceCom informant. And I was certain they were both of the Five.

Somehow, I had to get close to the Five.

I submerged that thought in my mind for a while, and revolved the borechain back into the waterscouter. Then I dropped the coursecomp rolls into their tubes, punched the "go" button, and settled back in one of the bucket-seats to see where the boat was going to take me.

The trip took less than three hours, with the scouter hitting close to one-sixty all the way. Toward the end, I saw the bulk of a continent rise up before the boat. First

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it was a thin, pencil line at the water's edge, then it was a long, thick black rope, then it bulked huge suddenly, and I imagined this was the continent of Arkasome. On which was the capital city of Arka III, Arka Center. And in that city were the Five, ruling this planet for five hundred years, till one of them had gone mad.

The boat scooted through a channel, and made slightly slower speed down a great river, for another hour. Finally, the willowy towers and flying arches of Arka Center slipped above the horizon, and twenty minutes later I docked.

I went ashore, wondering why I hadn't been met with intercontinental customs inspection, and realized they just might not have any. A united planet like Arka III might have dispensed with that long ago, and only maintained spaceship inspection. Since I hadn't come in the normal way, I was free of that.

The city was a hodgepodge. It was apparent they had tried to lay it out according to some municipal plan, but in the way all cities have of overflowing their bounds, this one had sprawled off in all directions. At its heart the streets radiated outward like the spokes of a wheel, with all municipal buildings near the hub, and business districts toward the rim. But there it stopped. In and around and between the planned sections, other sections had sprouted, till the streets toward the outer rim were twisting and narrow, covered with little shops, and dark alleys. Some streets came to dead ends unexpectedly, and others widened like fresh flowers into wide boulevards. The building structure was also odd. None of the buildings were conventional tower affairs. Many were so thin, it seemed the first wind would shatter them like icicles. Others were thick and stout as tree-trunks, and several even *looked* like the mossy-topped trees of the jungle. Parks were everywhere, and streetcorner shops in the open-air flourished.

With everything covered by the strange red light of Arka, and the multi-colored shadows it cast.

And somehow, without conscious intention, every building in Arka Center leaned toward the exact center of the wheel. Where the Haven of the Five Sisters stood. Like some mammoth

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crouching animal, settled back on its haunches and panting, staring from a million lightless eyes, its mouth covered by an electro-charged drawbridge. It sat there, towering over every other building in the huge city, and at its topmost minaret, a machine that seemed to be a searchlight — without beam —turned, turned, turned, constantly turned, never settling anywhere, but playing down across the entire city, to its outermost edge.

That bothered me for a moment, though I did not know why, and I threw off the feeling of discomfort only with effort.

I walked the streets, and watched silently. I wanted to find out what was wrong in the matriarchal set-up of Arka III, by discovery. If someone had to point it out to me, it might be the warped Sister, and I wouldn't have long to enjoy my knowledge.

As I walked the plasteel pavements, pavements that gave slightly beneath my weight, I realized that the informant's words had been true. There were no men on Arka III. Whether they had all been killed, as she said, or were imprisoned somewhere, it didn't matter. This was a world of women, and it seemed no man was safe here.

The women were not a race of beautiful amazons, however. There were attractive girls and beautiful girls, of course. But there were also ugly ones and plain ones. It was a complete cross-section, that might be gathered on any other planet, were the men to be excluded.

One thing I noticed, was the lack of attentiveness to the body. Even girls that were striking walked around with dirty shorts, unkempt hair, smudged faces. There seemed no pretense at make-up beauty, as on the other worlds of the galaxy. I reasoned the absence of men had removed that necessity.

And another thing I noticed, the girls were all somewhat shorter than myself. In my lifeshell I was just under six feet. No one else came up to my chin.

Once, a helotruck lifted from a building-deck, and took off straight up, loaded with young girls in farming clothes. Big, floppy hats with transparent slots in them so they could see the rows of crops they were harvesting, while being protected from the blistering heat of Arka.

They were undoubtedly

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bound for the Center farming areas, outside the city, near the river.

So work as usual was being carried on. Even with a dozen worlds under their thumb, the Arkan females were still turning out their crops. Probably for enslaved markets on those other worlds, at fantastically raised prices. The conquests had been economically sound, then. Which indicated the warped Sister might not be as warped as she seemed.

And then, too, there was that searchlight atop the Haven. Turning, turning, turning . . .

It only took me two days to find an occupation. I registered in at the Golden Leaf Hotel—an icicle tower some forty storeys high with dropshafts instead of escalators—and got out of showing my i.d. papers on the pretext they were arriving with my baggage the next day or so. I paid in advance for a week, from money that had been furnished me by SpaceCom, and went out to buy some new clothes. While shopping, the second day, I noticed something odd. Or rather, I noticed something that *wasn't* odd. That wasn't there.

Arka Center had no shops with art of any sort. There were no paintings, no sculpture, no music shops where records or scan-music could be purchased. Few book shops, and those contained volumes mainly on non-fiction subjects, of interest to homemakers, farmers or technicians. There was no fiction.

I asked a clerk in one of the few bookstores what had happened to the art-forms on Arka III, and she looked at me strangely.

"*What* art-forms? We haven't time for that sort of thing. Artists and sculptors were recruited for the raiding battalions. Didn't you know that? Say, where are you from?"

She was a short, dumpy thing with frowzled brown hair pulled into a knot at the base of her head, with square glasses and protruding ears. But she was enough of an old maid snoopy to wonder why I didn't know something as obvious as that.

"I've, uh, been away for a long while. Brought up overseas. You know. I'm just trying to get re-adjusted, to get established again."

The suspicion flattened out on her face, but didn't disappear completely.

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I got away from there in a hurry.

And the next day I bought rental on a little shop, in the center of the business area, not too far from the Haven. Using my structuralizer on some clay I brought up from the riverbank outside Arka Center, I went to work molding and dye-coloring some statuettes.

They weren't the greatest works of art I'd ever seen, but the structuralizer was used on all the worlds near the center of the galaxy, to temper sculpture done by artists. I wasn't certain they'd heard of the practice here. I hadn't seen any structuralizers, and thought the plan had every chance of succeeding.

What I wanted to do, was draw a certain kind of attention to myself, to get the Five interested in me. That might bring me into their circle of awareness, and from then on out, I'd have to play it by ear.

The shop had been open only one day, when the rush began. It was amazing how starved for even the smallest luxury of artistic effort these women were. They bought every one of the several hundred little figurines and ornate bowls I had structuralized, and clamored for more.

I had to close up, telling them I was out of stock, but that I'd have more the next week.

Then I spent several days gathering more clay, scrap metal, plastic bits and other assorted raw materials. In a few days I had another shop full. The structuralizer quickly re-aligned the atoms of the material, allowing me to project them into any shape or color. It took me a very short time to produce an effort of at-least-seeming-competence.

On the second day after I re-opened, two Haven guards came for me.

I was surprised to find that I looked on these women as just women. Not as sexual objects, but as people. It was, of course, the odd effects of my hypno-conditioning. And I found it a good thing. Had I let my normal, masculine attitudes toward women loose, I'd have been thrown into prison for some sort of perversion. I had found out that there were breeding grounds on one of the conquered worlds, where men were kept for just that purpose. But other than that strictly regulated contact,

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these women had no interest, made no mention other than necessary, of men. They were female in the sheerest sense of the world.

But they were as powerful as men, I found out.

The guards closed down my shop, took me and a carrier full of figurines, and led me by groundcar to the Haven.

Where I was put in solitary confinement.

Where I waited for what seemed a full day.

When they finally came back, I wouldn't move till they answered a couple of questions. They could have moved me easily enough had they wanted to, but it seemed easier to them to answer my questions; and I was a head taller than either of them.

They were heavily-muscled girls, no more than twenty years old each, and they seemed to like their work. I didn't want to have a knock-down-dragout with them, so I made my questions as polite as possible:

"Why was I brought here? Why did you close up my shop?"

The redhead settled back against her triple-thread blaster rifle, and looked at me with a bored expression. "We only do as we're told. Sister Karta said get you . . . so we got you. Anything else, you'll have to check with her."

That seemed to be that, so I got off the hard bunk and let them lead me down the corridor. It was a short one, and the ceiling angled to a V at the roof. There was a lighting element concealed in the trough of the ceiling, and lit the place with the same odd crimson glare as outside.

I had grown accustomed to it by now, but felt better when we stepped into a dropshaft that carried us up several floors. They walked me out of the corridor then, and down a short, carpeted hall. They left me standing before a heavy door, and walked back, disappeared down the dropshaft.

I looked around, and took a tentative step away, just to see what would happen, when the voice came out of a squawkbox above the door.

"Stand where you are please. You are being scanned, Miss Francha."

After a few moments, the door opened inward, and I saw a perfectly businesslike office. Heavy draperies, a solid black desk, and several business machines near the wall. Bookcases and trecorder

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cabinets lined the remaining empty walls. "Come in, won't you, Miss Francha." The voice was a well-controlled, deeply-toned one, that suggested great poise and knowledge. Shrewdness and experience were there too.

I stepped into the office, and the door closed silently behind me. Silently, tightly.

I walked into the room, and a group of lighting elements concealed in the rug sprang to life, casting off a pleasant green glow underfoot. Then I saw the speaker.

She was sitting behind the desk, of course, but so low in the overstuffed chair that she had been hidden from sight before. She was tiny, and wizened, and her hair was a fantastic mottled blue. Her face resembled a prune pit, and I could barely discern the glimmer of sparkles that were her deeply-sunken eyes.

"Sister Karta?" I asked, because I knew no other name.

She nodded, and passed her hand over the deskonsole. A chair slid out of the front of the desk for me. She motioned me to be seated, and I did it quickly.

There was something about her that unsettled me.

"Who are you, Miss Francha?"

Her question took me offstride. She wasn't beating around any orbits. This woman knew something, or at least suspected something, and she didn't cater to any dawdling. I had to answer, and I had to answer sharp, or there would be trouble; with Aaron Deems-Leona Francha on the sticky end.

"I-I'm just Leona Francha, Sister. That's all."

Her face, the wizened prune pit that it was, shrank even more. Into a picture of hatred. She didn't like defiance.

"Don't lie to me!" her voice lost its cultured overtones, became a bird rasp. "Don't lie to me! I know everything that goes on under Arkan rule, and there wasn't an artisan left after conscription! How did *you* escape?"

That gave me the edge, and I stammered through the next fifteen minutes, excusing myself for draft-dodging, pleading the cause of my art.

Finally, her face broke into a smile. She edged closer to the desk, and passed her hand over the konsole once again, this time with the fingers in a different position.

A finely-carved bowl—one

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of my own—rose out of the smooth desktop, supported in a metal-armed palm, and filled with mints. "Have one, my dear," she said sweetly, and I took one, nibbled it delicately.

She leaned even closer, till her flat, scrawny chest was against the polished ebony of the desk. "I'm glad I got to you before Tulla or Gersell. *They* would have had you put to death, but I was always a lover of the arts, and this conscription seemed unnecessary to me.

"I like your work, my dear. You must do some of it for me especially. There hasn't been much of that since . . . since . . ." her old, sunken eyes moved toward the wall behind me, and toward the ceiling. Somehow, inexplicably, I knew she was referring to the searchlight mechanism on the roof.

"But . . . that was another time," and there was a note of weariness in her voice. Five hundred years of weariness. "You won't have to worry about being conscripted any longer, my dear. You are now under my protection. Go back to your shop, and make me some fine statuary."

She smiled at me, a black line of mouth widening momentarily to show toothless gums. Then I found myself moving back across the rug, over the lights that went out as I passed, and out the door.

The last thing I saw, as the door tightened behind me, was Sister Karta, fondling with exquisite slowness, the bowl of mints. Her eyes were closed.

Was that the warped Sister?

When I walked back to my shop, I was escorted by two guards—not the ones who had arrested me. They left me at the door, saluted, so help me God! and wheeled away. I just stood there for a second and watched them march away, realizing how powerful the Five really were.

Powerful enough to close up an art shop, powerful enough to bend a planet of women to their will, powerful enough to conquer their end of the galaxy. Or at least, one of them was that powerful.

I looked up at that searchlight affair atop the Haven. It now assumed a more prominent position in my calculations. Not only did I have to track down the warped Sister, but I had to wreck that device.

Whatever it was, it was

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bending the thoughts of these women to war and the hatred of men. Whichever one of the Sisters had constructed and placed that machine in operation, she had probably known it would change the Arkan females before anyone could rip down the machine.

But what kept it inviolate now? Was there some safety mechanism up there that prevented anyone from getting to it? I knew it was the device that was causing the change in the Arkans . . . Sister Karta had shown me that, inadvertently.

Well, then, it was obvious *she* wasn't the warped Sister. She was unhappy about the wars. Or was she? Could that have been a cover-up? I was back where I'd started, and if anything, slightly more confused.

I opened the shop and went back to making figurines. I had to stop myself once, finding myself constructing a doll-like replica of Sister Karta—prune face, sunken, aged eyes, blue hair—and reduce it to slag with the structuralizer.

Late that night, I had left the front door open while I worked, for the heat of the day had melted off slowly, and the refreshing breezes in off the river cooled me as I worked, when I heard someone come into the shop.

I was in the back, and called out, "I'm closed now. I'm sorry, but would you come back tomor—"

There had been no answer, and I looked up in the middle of a word, to see a tall, thin woman, taller than myself, wrapped in a night-black cape and hood that concealed her face. I dropped the bowl I had been working on, and it tinkled to flinders at my feet.

I tried to ask who she was, but found my tongue stuck to the floor of my mouth.

"You are Leona Francha, the protegée of Sister Karta? You are she?" her voice was a whisper. It sounded like the dead sands of the Flakoorian Deserts, whispering against one another.

I nodded slowly, lifting my arm away from my side slightly, so the blastick could drop free from my armpit, and into my hand if I needed it quickly.

She shrugged her head, and the cowl dropped back across her shoulders. She was a narrow-faced woman of about thirty-five, with striking eyes of blue, and a clear complexion. Her hair

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was auburn and wound in braids atop her head.

"I am Sister Mannone," she said, and my estimate of thirty-five went far wrong. *Five hundred* and thirty-five was closer.

"Can I help you, Sister?" I asked, bowing slightly.

"I think *you* can help me," she replied, and sat down in the one relaxer I'd bought for the workroom. "I am your contact on Arka III." She smiled up at me warmly, and I felt the heaviness in my stomach ease away. The informant.

Still, I wasn't certain, so I let her lead me in the conversation.

"My contact, Sister Mannone? I'm not certain I know what you mean."

Her face darkened. "You are an Operative of SpaceCom, here on Arka III to eliminate my Sister who has turned our planet into a world of war. Is that sufficient, Miss Francha, or should I quote you verbatim the message I sent?"

That would do nicely, and I told her so.

She quoted it exactly.

Relief washed me quickly. "I'm glad to be of service to you, Sister," I said then.

"There isn't much time to lose," she said, leaning forward with intensity. Her eyes were tired, and I imagined she had been through a great deal. "The day after tomorrow will begin an all-out campaign upon the Sulaquen Worlds, and many thousands will die, unless we can stop her."

I interrupted. "Who do you mean by 'her,' Sister?"

"You haven't been able to tell yet? You met her. You are her ward. Karta, of course."

I had reasoned it out that way, also, but I wanted to hear her say it. I didn't think it would be appropriate for the moment to let her know I was a man. Later, not now.

"What do you have in mind?"

She leaned closer, said, "The reason I needed you was that she is invulnerable to anyone of this world. The conditioning of our people, for the last five hundred years has made it impossible for anyone to kill a Sister. And as if that weren't enough, we have our personal Barriers."

"Barriers?"

"Yes. I'll show you." She stood up, handed me a bar of plasteel. "Hit me with that," she said.

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I took the bar and looked at it, then at her, with incredulity. That bar was enough to stave in the side of a scouter. It wasn't heavy, but it was tremendously strong. "Surely you can't mean that."

"Hit me!"

Her tone was one of command, and I felt myself lifting the bar, swinging it, before I could stop myself.

The bar slammed toward her, hit a point about an inch away from her body, and rebounded. The bar flew from my hand and sailed across the room, shattering a stand of figurines I had finished that evening.

"That protects us from each other."

"Then how do you expect me to do anything to her?" I was still stunned by the Barrier display; they might not know about structuralizers here on Arka III, but they had a few things SpaceCom would have given a great deal to possess.

"I have had one of my personal technicians working on an attachment for the wave-generator atop the Haven," she said, "and she has perfected it so that now it will cancel out personal Barriers, within its own closed field.

"What I propose is that we have a special showing of your work, in the roof-gardens, tomorrow, and I will have my technician install the attachment. Then when her Barrier goes off, you can kill her quickly. I would do it myself, but there would be repercussions from my Sisters, should they discover I killed Karta.

"Then, I will make certain you are freed. You can leave Arka III, and we will go back to peace and farming."

It sounded intricate and odd, but I had to agree.

"Tomorrow, then," she said finally, rising. "I'll send my personal guards for you about three o'clock."

I thanked her, and watched her leave, as silently as she had come. Then I sat down to think.

If she was telling the truth, and Karta *was* the warped Sister, then her explanations were fine.

But . . .

If she was lying (and somehow I trusted her even less than the wizened Karta) then there was another explanation altogether. She had me pegged, all right. That much I knew. So if I came up to the Haven, and she had the Barriers turned off, and I killed Karta, she might kill

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me, and say, "This is a spy. She has killed our sister! Death to all spies!" and that would be that.

That way she could get two birds with one stone, and not have to worry about any repercussions of justice.

But that meant Karta was my informant. Why hadn't she said something to me? Was she waiting for a showdown like this one tomorrow?

I could only wait and find out.

But while I waited, I hatched a few ideas myself.

The roof gardens of the Haven were a blue and white and gold mélange of blossoms and growths and vines.

And there, in its own sheathing, with a Barrier around it — naturally — was the wave generator Mannone had spoken about.

The Sisters were gathered around my displays, while I showed them how a structuralizer worked, and they paid close attention. The other three Sisters were there: Tulla, Gersel, and Pilbee. They ranged from a little square of a woman to a voluptuous flame-haired beauty. These women had used their longevity in different forms. And I was sure each one was satisfied with what she looked like.

Karta was there, and her sunken eyes roved quickly back and forth.

I talked to them for a half hour, till I saw a young girl come onto the roof, walk quickly to the wave generator, while the Sisters' backs were to it, and attach a small metal box just outside the Barrier.

Then I saw the machine waver, and I knew the Barrier was gone. The Sisters must have known it too, because they wavered also, and *their* Barriers were gone. All but Mannone's. Hers remained fixed . . . for she had not wavered.

Then I knew I had been right in my second guess. Mannone was the warped one, and this was a clever plot.

I saw Mannone eying me carefully, as the other Sisters looked about wildly, as though trying to regain their Barriers. She wanted me to kill Karta, so she could put me out of the way, and take over Arka III completely.

I let the blastick drop into my hand, and aimed it at Karta. I saw Mannone moving toward her waist-pouch, thrown over a relaxer on the

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roof, and I knew there was a triple-threader in there, too.

But I didn't fire my blastick. I grabbed for the structuralizer. I knew Mannone had somehow rigged her own Barrier so it would remain on, but it had to be off under her feet, otherwise she couldn't have touched ground. So that was her Achilles Heel. Literally.

I aimed the structuralizer at her feet and melted away the roof under her feet. She slipped and fell in the puddle of molten metal, and I heard her scream sharply as the red-hot matter burned her feet.

She fell, and the Barrier wavered. It was gone, and in a moment I had bathed her in liquid fire from my blastick.

Then the Sisters were on me, and someone laid one of my own figurines alongside my skull. I went down into pitch-darkness.

When I came to, I was looking up at the blast furnace of Arka itself. I was on the roof, and Karta was hurriedly explaining what had happened—as much as she knew of it—to her Sisters.

I felt the bottle of decoagulator in my waist-pouch, and I figured now was the time to back up Karta's story.

I pulled it out, moving quickly and smoothly, for they weren't looking at me, thinking I was still unconscious.

I applied the bottle to the seam-point of the lifeshell, and felt the godawful burning of it!

It was as though someone were stripping my flesh from me in rolls. I stood up and screamed . . .

. . . and then the lifeshell dropped away.

They stared at me for a second, and then they were on me again, battering me with their fists, screaming, "Man! Man! Man! Kill him, it's a man!"

All I had on was the loincloth I'd worn under the lifeshell, and they were beating me quite effectively, till I realized why. The wave generator was still going strong.

I shoved against the redhaired Pilbee's full chest, and she went back into the other three. I made a dash for the blastick I'd dropped when they'd cold-caulked me, and came up with it spouting. I aimed at the little box near the searchlight-shaped mechanism, because it wasn't inside the Barrier, but was hooked to it somehow. The

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box blew up, and the Barrier around the generator wavered. It was gone, and I poured on the power.

With a rending of screaming of howling of metal tearing itself to atoms, the machine blew itself up, and the roof was sprayed with flying parts.

I ducked behind a display, barely missing being flattened by a chunk of plating bigger than my head.

When I came back up, I saw the other four Sisters were all right, but were standing around looking confused, shaking their heads.

They were coming out from under the effects of the generator.

Karta came over to me, and held out her hand in Earth style greeting.

I had one big question:

"Why didn't you let me know who you were? And how did Mannone find out I was an Operative?"

"I had another plan of my own for luring Mannone out of the city but somehow she found the re-routed reports of your ship's sinking in the Western, and reasoned you were another Operative.

Then she waited till something unusual occurred—such as your arrival in the city, and the opening of your shop—and sent her guards to get you. I intercepted them.

"So she knew she had to get rid of you more subtly. That was why all this. Had I had another day, I would have told you all this . . . but she was listening on a room-tap to our conversation that day, so I couldn't."

We talked a while longer, and I found out they were withdrawing their troops from all the conquered worlds, and bringing back the men from the breeding planet.

I grammed SpaceCom and let them know the job was done, and then settled back to wait for a relief ship to pick me up.

Sister Karta found me, just leaving the radio shack in the Haven.

"Is there anything I can do for you while you remain on Arka III?"

Grinning, I said, "Sister, there isn't a thing you can do for me. Except to let me wander around Arka Center on my own." She thought more protocol was in order, but I shooed the idea off.

I like the idea.

The one man on a planet of male-starved women . . . you bet your life I liked the idea.

THE END

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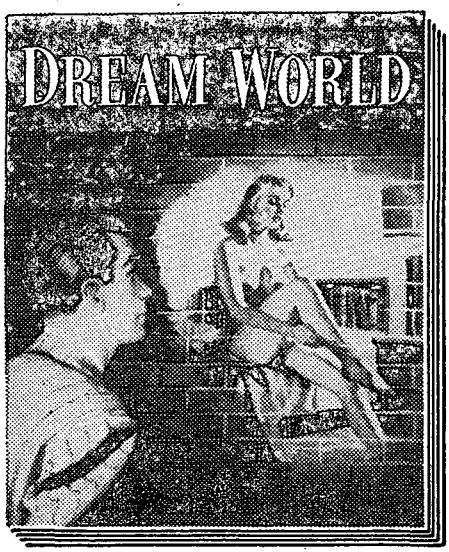

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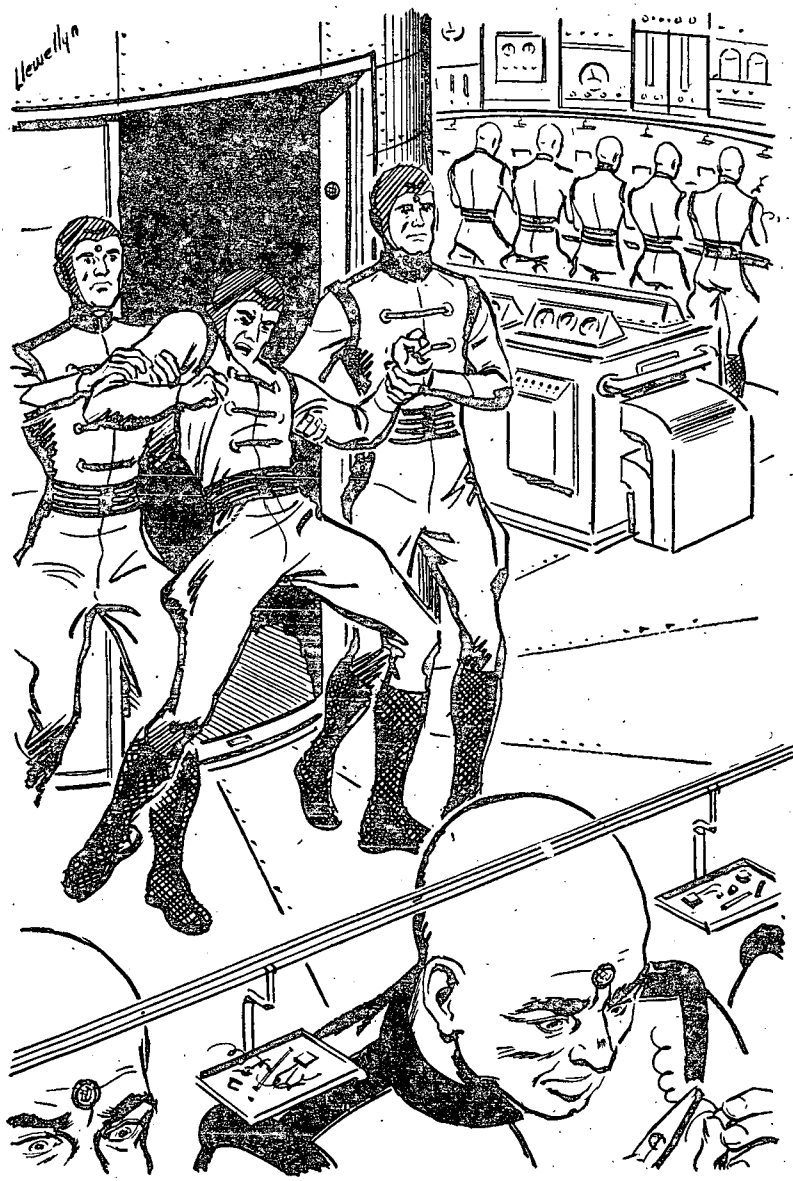

This was the lair of the Khethlani. What dread secrets of injustice were hidden here?

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THE MYSTERY OF DENEB IV

When Dave Carter tried to rescue the Denebians he found himself in a den of thieves. And he had cause to remember Shakespeare's observation: "He who steals my purse steals trash."

By ROBERT SILVERBERG

THE first thing that crossed Dave Carter's mind was that the SOS was some kind of hoax. Then a fist thudded into the back of his neck, and he knew it was worse than a hoax—it was a trap.

His knees sagged and he grabbed wildly for the side of his spaceship. Steadying himself, he struck out with a fist.

His unknown assailant grunted. Carter's eyes widened as he discovered he was fighting another Earthman, here on this alien world in the Deneb system. *What the devil is this?* Carter asked himself, as his fist crashed into the other's stomach. *They ask me to come rescue them—and then they jump me from behind.*

The man was wearing the gray-and-gold uniform of the missing *Vanguard* expedition. He was a big, rangy spaceman. His eyes glittered with a cold menace that Carter had never seen in human eyes before.

Carter reached back, grasped the rungs of the ladder behind him with both hands, and kicked out at the other. The man crumpled backward onto the ground. Carter ran over to him.

He put a knee on the other's chest. "Who are you?" he demanded.

No answer.

"Why'd you send out an SOS?" Carter demanded.

The other man glared coldly at him without replying.

Carter pulled him to a sitting position and slapped him, twice, hard. "Answer me! You're from the *Van-*

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guard expedition, aren't you?"

"Yes." The voice sounded steely, metallic.

"Then why'd you jump me? I picked up your SOS and came down here to rescue you! Answer me!"

"You'll know the answers soon enough."

Carter shook his head angrily. "I want to know right now. Where are the other members of the expedition?"

"They are here. They are all safe."

Pulling the other to his feet, Carter drew his blaster and said, "Suppose you take me to them—right now. I want some explanation of all this. Move!"

An hour before, Carter had been in space, traveling alone from the Base Hospital on Rigel IV toward Ophiuchus VII. He expected to spend his period of convalescence there. Ophiuchus VII was a low-grav world set aside as a vacation planet for recuperating invalids.

Carter had been injured in a reactor explosion aboard the Starship *Alpha Centauri*, where he had been navigator. He came out of that pretty lightly—radiation burns, a fractured skull, and little other damage. Some skin grafts and a complicated titanium-plate rebuild had his body and his skull as good as new within weeks. He was on his way to Ophiuchus to rest up before returning to spaceline duty.

But his flight was interrupted when his detectors picked up an SOS as he passed the Deneb system.

"SOS! SOS! General rescue call!"

It was coming over on a wide-beam cast. Carter localized it on Deneb IV, an unexplored world, and replied, "I hear you. Who's this?"

"Survey Ship *Vanguard*. We're in trouble."

"How many are you?"

"Twelve, altogether. Urgent that you rescue us."

Carter glanced around his small ship. Its maximum capacity was fifteen; he could just about make it. "I'll be right down," he said. "Give me landing coordinates."

They read off a string of figures and he computed an orbit. Minutes later, he had set his ship down in the exact spot they had selected, only to find the planet bare of life and no Earthmen in sight.

He had looked around, puzzled. Then the rangy spaceman had struck him from behind.

And now, Carter was fol-

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lowing his captive through a wild, untamed jungle, heading into some strange mystery at whose nature he could only guess. The titanium plate in his skull was beginning to itch faintly as he moved deeper and deeper into the jungle.

After a while, signs of inhabitation began to appear. Carter spotted the golden hull of a spaceship towering above the trees, and touched his guide's arm. "Is that the *Vanguard*?"

"Yes."

Behind the ship, Carter could now see a large clearing, and people moving around in it, clad in the uniform of the Survey Division of the Intergalactic Federation. There was a building in the background, square and dull-gray.

A man stepped forward to meet them. He was distinguished-looking and wore the uniform of a Squadron Leader.

"I'm Gendron," he said. "Commander of the *Vanguard*."

"The name's Dave Carter, navigator, late of Starship *Alpha Centauri*. I picked up your SOS call."

Gendron blinked. "SOS? What SOS?"

"The one you sent out, of course," Carter replied, astonished. "I've got it on tape back at my ship. You asked for immediate rescue, said it was urgent. I landed, and this man here attacked me. I managed to get him under control."

Gendron looked mystified. "There's been some misunderstanding here. We're in no trouble whatever—in fact, we're doing splendidly. As you can see, we've erected our headquarters building, and we're settling about to map the planet, according to instructions."

Carter frowned. "What about this man here?"

"You mean Sherman? I'm afraid I can't tell you." The Squadron Leader turned to Carter's captive. "Did you attack this man?"

"No," Sherman said. "He jumped me first."

"That's a lie!" snapped Carter. "I came out of my ship to see where you people were, and he hit me from behind."

Gendron glanced at him quizzically. "That's hard to believe. Sherman's one of my most reliable men. Lieutenant Carter, I'm inclined to doubt your entire story. Would you mind explaining yourself?"

Carter began to feel a

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growing sense of exasperation. "Look," he said. "I was minding my own business when this SOS came. I'm on leave now; I'm wasting my precious free time fooling with you people. So I picked up your SOS, and I landed. Then this man hit me. That's all I can tell you."

"I'm completely at a loss to clarify," said the Squadron Leader. "So far as I know, we sent out no SOS. We're in no danger here. We haven't even begun to complete our work. I'm sorry if we've caused you some inconvenience."

Carter shook his head. *Maybe I'm going batty,* he thought. *Maybe that blast aboard the* Alpha C *juggled my brains as well as cracked my skull. Maybe I didn't hear any SOS after all.*

"Okay," he said finally. "I'll go back to my ship and blast off. Forget the whole thing."

"That might be the best idea," Gendron agreed. "Would you want Sherman to show you the way?"

"I think I can find it myself," Carter said. He turned and headed out of the clearing, trying to convince himself that he still had a little of his sanity left.

He moved about three steps. Then something struck him a ringing blow on the back of his head, and he toppled to the ground.

Carter woke, feeling as if a mountain had fallen on him. His head ached miserably, his eyes wouldn't focus, his tongue felt thick and sandpapery.

He tried to move his hands, and discovered that he was securely bound. His arms were strapped together with what looked like leather thongs, and his ankles were tied as well.

He was in a dark, windowless room—probably somewhere in the squat building in the clearing.

He struggled to get his mind functioning again. All he could think of was the way his head hurt.

Gendron had hit him from behind. That seemed to be the rule, on this planet. After denying everything about the SOS, Gendron had clubbed him when he wasn't looking. It didn't figure.

And there was that faint tickling in his skull, beside the raw pain of the bruise. He didn't understand that either.

Carter sat up against the cold wall of the dark room, and yanked at his bonds.

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They didn't give. He was trussed like a Christmas turkey—for what?

Suddenly, he stopped moving, and listened.

Voices.

They were speaking in the same cold, metallic tones the spaceman Sherman had used when Carter first landed.

"I don't understand it," someone said. "He walked right through the control."

"It was peculiar, all right. He came within the sphere of radiation and it didn't have any effect at all. Gendron had to club him or he would have gotten away."

"We couldn't have that," the first voice said. "We need all the men we can get for The Project."

Project? What project? Carter asked himself. *What the blazes is this, anyway?*

The voices stopped, leaving Carter alone in the darkness. Conjectures ran through his mind, none of them adding up to anything but the obvious fact that the Survey Squad of the *Vanguard* was up to something fishy.

His head still throbbed, but not as badly as before. The itchy tickling still continued. It was—it was almost as if something were trying to enter his mind! He fought a desperate desire to break his bonds and rip open the front of his skull and scratch away the tickling before it drove him insane.

If I'm not insane already, he thought grimly.

A light flickered somewhere in the distance, and then the door of his cell opened. Someone came in. Carter blinked as light flooded in. It was a few moments before he could see.

Gendron stood there.

"I see you're awake, Lieutenant Carter."

"Damned perceptive of you, Gendron. I'll bet you see I'm breathing, too."

Gendron chuckled hollowly. "I've come to apologize for hitting you yesterday. It was a misunderstanding."

"Oh? Like the phony SOS was a misunderstanding?"

Gendron seemed to scowl. He turned and gestured to someone beyond Carter's view, and two more men entered the cell.

"Well? How does it look?" one of them asked.

"Not so good," said Gendron. "I don't think he's under control yet. I don't know how he can resist so well."

"You sure he's still under his own will? How can you tell?"

"He's belligerent," said

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Gendron. "He's the same as he was last night."

"The Khethlani never fails," said one of the two men. "How could it go wrong?"

Carter frowned. Apparently they expected him to have been taken over by someone or something—and he hadn't been.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Gendron. Your whatever-it-is just hasn't taken hold."

"Very strange, Carter. We may have to kill you."

"You know the Khethlani doesn't like to lose men," one of the others reminded Gendron. "We ought to do everything we can to bring him under control."

Gendron nodded. "Untie his legs."

One of the men bent and unwrapped the thongs. Immediately Carter's foot lashed out in a vicious kick that sent the other away yelling.

Gendron slapped Carter twice. Then he said, "That proves it. He's definitely not under control. Let's take him to the Khethlani."

They shoved him roughly out of the room and down a long, winding corridor toward a distant door. As they pushed him along, Carter felt the itching inside his skull grow to fierce proportions, until he could hardly bear it. The faces of his three captors became oddly peaceful, oddly emotionless, as they drew near the door.

Gendron stepped forward and threw a switch. The door slid upward. Carter looked in—and saw the Khethlani.

It was a pulsing mass of protoplasm some twenty feet across, floating in a bath of some thick gray-green fluid that roiled obscenely beneath its bulk. A single great eye stared upward from the middle of the thing, and from the eye outward radiated corded blue bundles of nerve-cells that formed a web running through the creature's legless body.

Gendron and the other two men from the *Vanguard* were standing as if frozen, staring down at the Khethlani. Carter grasped the railing that encircled the thing's pit, and held on firmly. Beating waves of thought emanated from the Khethlani.

I control you, Earthmen. I am your master.

The thoughts washed up over Carter's brain with almost unbearable urgency. *I am your master. You will obey me to the fullest.*

Carter glanced at the three men with him. Their eyes

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were glassy; they were caught in an unbreakable hypnotic current.

"You . . . are . . . my . . . master," Gendron said slowly. The other two repeated the phrase, parrot-like.

Carter stared down at the horror in the pit. Again the wave of thought rolled up. *I am your master, strange one.*

The force of the thing's mind overwhelmed him; he rocked dizzily, but kept his balance. Now, he knew what had happened, why Gendron had behaved as he did.

The *Vanguard* had landed on unexplored Deneb IV, and the minds of its crew of twelve had been snared by the Khethlani. It had turned them into so many puppets.

They had set a trap for him. Evidently the Khethlani was greedy for minds, for some purpose of its own. Somehow, Carter had avoided the trap, had stayed free of the thing's control. Even now, at close range, he was able to resist the powerful hypnotic command.

I am your master, came the statement a fourth time. *I order you to kneel.*

Carter saw Gendron and the other two looking at him. Sweat burst out and ran down his face as he fought off the Khethlani's mental command.

"He resists," Gendron said, surprised. "He resists the Khethlani."

I order you to kneel. Kneel or be destroyed.

Gendron began to draw forth his blaster. Carter grasped the rail more tightly, shuddering.

There was only one thing to do. Keeping his mind shut tight against the creature's command, he knelt slowly and bowed his head.

"You . . . are . . . my . . . master," Carter said, in slow, solemn tones. "I . . . will . . . obey . . . you."

"The Khethlani has won!" Gendron exclaimed. "He's under control!"

Rise, Earthman.

Carter rose obediently and faced the creature in the pit.

I am now your master. You will obey everything.

"You are my master now. I will obey everything."

When they were in the corridor again, Gendron yanked the switch and the heavy metal door clanged down, shutting them off from the chamber of the Khethlani. The Squadron Leader turned to Carter, grinning.

"Well, now you're with us. How does it feel?"

"Like being with the team

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again," Carter lied. "Brief me on what's been going on here."

"There are about a dozen Khethlani, on various worlds in this sector. One to a world. They've been that way for millions of years—it's an ancient and very wise race."

"And where do we fit in?"

"We're busy building a thought-generator," explained Gendron. "The Khethlani wants to set up a linkage with its brothers, and it needs our help."

"I get it. It's a sort of thought-amplifier."

"Right. The Khethlani shows us how to build it—but he can't do it himself. We're like his arms and legs. He works through us. It's a tremendous job."

"How far have you gotten?"

"Just the framework," Gendron said. "That's why we're sending out that wide-beam SOS. We need all the extra hands we can get. You're the third one so far."

"Neat. Only it almost didn't work on me."

"I still don't understand that. You resisted incredibly well. But you couldn't stand up to the Khethlani face-to-face."

"No," Carter said. "Of course not."

"Here we are," said Gendron. "This is what we've done on the thought-generator so far."

He opened another door, and Carter saw a large room almost completely filled with a complex webwork of machinery. Half a dozen Earthmen were working busily in the far corner, soldering delicate wires together and assembling an array of transistors.

"It's a long, slow, tough job," said Gendron. "The Khethlani's guiding us every step of the way."

"And when it's finished—?"

"Then the twelve Khethlani will be in contact with each other. Then they'll blend their mental powers into one super-being that will control the universe."

Carter barely repressed a shudder. "How wonderful!" he forced himself to say.

"Yes. Wonderful." Gendron slapped him on the back. "I'm sorry we had to rough you up, Carter, but we had to get you under control."

"I understand. When are you going to show me what I can do here?"

Gendron looked at him peculiarly for a moment, and Carter realized he had blun-

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dered. Supposedly all orders would be coming direct from the Khethlani.

"We won't have to show you," Gendron said. "You'll know when you're supposed to work."

"Yes, of course," Carter said. "I see that. And I think my time is coming now."

"Good. We're happy to have you with us."

Gendron walked away, and Carter moved stiffly toward one corner of the room and pretended to busy himself with the tangle of equipment he found there. Whatever this thing the Khethlani was designing was, it was a miracle of engineering. He watched the others in the room working busily, their minds and fingers guided by the promptings of the thing in the pit.

It was only a matter of time before the Khethlani found out that Carter wasn't really under control—if it didn't know already. As soon as the Khethlani was certain, it would communicate that to Gendron and his men, and this time they wouldn't be merciful.

He was immune to the creature's control. That was apparent.

Why? There was only one answer—the titanium plate in his head.

His skull had been crushed like paper in the reactor explosion, but the medics on Rigel IV had painstakingly patched him together again with a cranium fashioned mostly from thin metal. From the outside, it was indistinguishable from the original—but the metal apparently served as a shield against the telepathic commands of the Khethlani. It was a logical explanation.

Then he had little time to waste. Soon, the Khethlani would discover his bluff.

Carter would have to make his move long before then. The thin titanium plate in his skull was all that stood between the Khethlani and its dream of galactic conquest. He had to bank on it.

Gendron was outside, in the clearing. Carter came up to to him, "How are things going, Lieutenant?"

"Just fine," Carter said. "I'll have to leave you for a few moments, though."

"Oh? What for?"

"The Khethlani is sending me back to my ship," Carter explained. "It thinks some of the equipment I have aboard can be built into the generator."

"Very good," Gendron said. "That stuff can be important

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to us, all right. You want someone to go with you?"

Another test, Lieutenant Carter thought. "Of course not! The Khethlani is guiding me!"

"Of course, Lieutenant."

The trouble was that the Khethlani was *not* guiding him, and it took him several hours to find his way back to his ship. Eventually he found it, climbed up the catwalk, and entered.

Waves of thought beat at him suddenly. He sensed hatred, anger. The Khethlani was aware! His deception was at its end.

At this distance, though, the Khethlani's commands were just so much tinny jangling in his mind. Methodically, Carter went about his work, grimly adjusting the automatic pilot of the ship, computing an orbit.

It took fifteen minutes. When he was finished, he blasted off, and his small ship rose high above the atmosphere of Deneb IV. He snapped on his radio.

The detectors immediately picked up the SOS broadcast. Evidently the Khethlani kept its lure out at all times. He ignored it, and began to speak into the mike.

"Gendron! Gendron! You hear me?"

There was a crackling moment of silence, and then: "I hear you. What are you doing, Carter?"

"Never mind that now. I want you to get all your men out of that building and as far from the clearing as possible, right away. You get that?"

"You're a madman, Carter. The Khethlani will put a stop to—"

"It hasn't stopped me yet. I'm warning you—get out of that building, or you'll die with your master."

He snapped off the radio. Gendron had had ample warning, and Carter had other things to occupy his mind. The little ship was reaching the top of its climb now, and soon it would be levelling out and plunging back down toward the surface of the planet below.

The Khethlani's thoughts beat frantically at him.

Ground your ship! I am your master! I am—

You'll be nothing in five minutes, Carter thought fiercely. His ship was moving downward now, back into Deneb IV's atmosphere.

It was decelerating rapidly. At ten thousand miles, Carter cut in the automatic pilot and climbed into his ejection suit.

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Still the ship plunged downward. Five thousand miles. Two thousand.

At sixty thousand feet, Carter pressed the emergency ejection stud, and a giant cybernetic hand shoved him gently but firmly through the gaping hatch of his ship. He was swept away, off to one side, and drifted slowly the long distance to the ground.

The bombardment of thought from the Khethlani became almost unbearable. The alien creature knew now that it was doomed.

"Go ahead," Carter yelled derisively. "Hypnotize my spaceship! Make it turn around!"

He was still twenty thousand feet from the ground when a bright flare of energy squirted forth as his ship roared into the building that housed the Khethlani.

There was just a smoking pit in the ground when Carter got there. Everything had been totally destroyed by the crash.

And for the first time since his landing, Carter no longer felt the itching in his mind. The Khethlani was dead.

He turned and saw a man approaching, dazed and smoke-blackened. It was Gendron.

"Who are you?" Gendron asked uncertainly. "Where are my men? My ship?"

"You're the only one left, Commander. The others didn't get away in time."

Quickly, Carter explained to the dazed officer, who had no recollection of anything that had happened to him since entering the Khethlani's sphere of power.

"That's—that's unbelievable," Gendron said.

"It's all over now." Carter glanced upward. Something bright was circling the planet in a landing orbit.

"What's that?"

"It's a spaceship," Carter said. "Drawn in by your decoy SOS signal—only now it's the real thing."

"Will he see us?"

"He'll see the smoke," Carter said. "He'll rescue us."

There'd be some delay now, he realized, before he got to Ophiuchus VII for that vacation.

In fact, he might never get there, he knew now. He had a big job ahead of him—and he was the only man in the universe qualified to do it, him and his tin skull.

He glanced upward. The job was waiting. There were eleven more Khethlani out there to be rooted out and destroyed. **THE END**

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The announcement went out and gorgeous girls responded from all over the nation. But after being put through a routine that would have exhausted a water buffalo, they asked each other in amazement: This is a——

BEAUTY CONTEST?

By HENRY SLESAR

THE girl in the yellow bathing suit plucked out her hairpins in exasperation and flung them on the vanity table. The redhead seated beside her looked over understandingly.

"I know how you feel, honey," she said. "I had an electro-perm last week, and just look at me. You think they'd have a *few* facilities around this dump." She surveyed the room disconsolately. It was small and jerry-built, with only two tables and two mirrors meant to be shared by six girls. It was a duplicate of all the thirty cabins, strung out like a serpentine railroad train on the edge of the Omaha Spaceport.

"I hate myself when I look like this," the girl in the bathing suit moaned. She looked in the mirror critically. The face that looked back was actually very pretty, with its wide-set eyes and clear, smooth planes. Her figure was equally attractive; it had to be, to qualify for the finals of the Miss Outer Space contest.

"We all feel the same way," the redhead said sympathetically. "Oh, they're trying to be nice though. Captain Lester—you know him, the cute one with the freckles—he was really sweet. But these space jockeys just don't understand women, I guess." She sighed, but then smiled reminiscently as she recalled the captain's embarrassment upon showing the girls their quarters.

"Well, I'm sorry I ever came," said the other girl, tugging at her blonde curls

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The gal who won this one had to be more than beautiful.

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with a comb. Her eyes blurred with tears.

"Hey, Cleveland!"

Another blonde, wearing an electric-blue sweater, scurried over to the unhappy girl. Her face was lit with excitement, and her high heels clicked enthusiastically. "Can I borrow your Chanel?" she said.

"What for?" said the redhead sourly. "Got a date?"

"Maybe," said blue-sweater mysteriously.

"Janie!" The girl in the bathing suit caught her eyes in the mirror. "You can't do that," she said in a shocked voice. "It's against the rules!"

"Rules," Janie answered lightly, "are made to be broken." She sprayed the perfume on lavishly. "Besides, it's just for a walk. Some nice second-looie's going to show me around the spaceport."

"But they'll disqualify you if they find out," said the first blonde. "Is it worth it?"

"Oh, Cleveland!" She patted the girl on her bare shoulder. "I'm bored to death. I've spent a whole month with nothing but female company. I need a change!"

"Think we don't feel the same way?" said the redhead angrily. "You knew the way it would be when you entered the contest—"

"Your green eyes are showing, dear," said the blonde, helping herself to some of Cleveland's lipstick.

"Green eyes, my elbow!" the redhead exploded. "I could get *fifty* of these space jockeys to squire me around. You think it's so hard? But I had to come a thousand miles for these lousy finals, and I'm not stupid enough to risk everything for a guided tour with some shavetail—"

"Don't protest so much!" the blonde jeered.

The redhead shrieked, dropped her brush, and started for the blonde. Luckily, Maria, a hefty brunette with a voluptuous figure, stepped between them.

"Cut it out!" she pleaded. "It'll be lights out in a little while. Fight it out in the daytime."

"I don't want any trouble," the blonde said petulantly. "I just want a little fun."

"All right," said the redhead. "Let's forget it. I guess we're all just tired." She seated herself again and stroked her hair lazily with the brush. "And we've got quite a day tomorrow."

"You said it," agreed the girl called Cleveland. She picked up a mimeographed sheet from the table and read

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from it aloud. "Eight-thirty, breakfast and initial briefing by Captain Johannson. Ten o'clock, basic questionnaire. Eleven o'clock, physical examination. Twelve o'clock, lunch. Two o'clock, domestic science test. Four o'clock, photography." She looked up at the others pathetically. "Isn't that awful?"

"Sounds okay to me," said the blonde, putting the final touches on her outfit by stringing gold bracelets up and down her arm. "Except that domestic science business. I burn water."

"Then you might as well go home," said the redhead sardonically. "You've got to be a Betty Crocker to win *this* clambake. Along with everything else."

"It's the stiffest beauty contest *I* ever saw," said the hefty brunette wistfully. "Honestly, I've won a couple back home, and all I had to do was—well, you know—kind of parade around a little."

"Well, this is an *important* contest," said the blonde. "I mean," she added hastily, on seeing the hurt look cross Maria's face, "this is a *big* contest. You know what you get if you're Miss Outer Space?"

"We know the prizes by heart, honey," said the redhead. "Why else do you think we're here?"

"It's rough, though," Cleveland admitted, turning the paper over and reading the agenda marked SECOND DAY. "Look what happens Tuesday. Ten o'clock, endurance test. What do you suppose they mean by that?"

"I don't know," the redhead shrugged. "But it sure doesn't sound so good."

"And listen to this one. Three o'clock, outer space question period. What about that?"

"But I don't *know* anything about outer space," the big brunette complained. "It just isn't fair!"

"Maybe it won't be so bad," Cleveland said comfortingly. "After all, the judges must know that we're not astronomers or anything—"

"Seems like a heck of a lot of fuss to me," the redhead said, shaking her head. "But I got this far. And even if I get bounced, at least I've met a few nice guys—"

"Lot of good *that* does," said the blonde, who had started for the doorway of the cabin. "Before you know it, they'll all be shipped out to Mars, and you'll never see them again."

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"Yeah?" said the redhead. "Then how about your second-looie?"

The blonde made a despairing gesture. "Well, what can a girl *do?*" She looked at them imploringly, and then went through the doorway.

"Lights out in fifteen minutes, girls," said a man's voice over the loudspeaker in the corner of the room.

"That's Captain Lester," said the redhead. "Such a doll." She sighed deeply, wound a bright green scarf around her head, and got up from the table. She patted Cleveland's hand. "Cheer up, kid," she said. "You'll feel better in the morning."

The messboys in the spaceport dining room couldn't stop grinning as they wheeled their trays between the crowded tables. The room was filled with an unfamiliar and highly decorative array of attractive young ladies, and the musical din of their voices was an unusual sound in the rough masculine atmosphere. Breakfast had been prepared with extra care, and the girls had responded with remarkable appetites, calling for more up and down the line. It was only until their second cups of coffee were poured that Captain Johannson entered the room, looking a trifle uneasy, and rapped for attention on a water-glass.

"Good morning, ladies," he said briskly, and flushed when they echoed him with giggling "good mornings" of their own. He rapped the glass once more, and tried to keep a straight face.

"I'd like to welcome you again to the Omaha Spaceport," he said. "We're happy that you're here, and we're sorry if you have suffered any inconveniences. As you can imagine, we're hardly equipped to entertain almost two hundred young ladies, but we're doing the best we can under the circumstances. We hope you'll put up with us for the three days of the contest, and you'll find it all worthwhile."

"He's cute!" said a voice in the rear, and the room broke with laughter. The captain really crimsoned now, and he looked sternly at the grinning messboys.

"Harumph!" he said loudly. "As I was saying, you'll only have to put up with us for three days, so it won't be too bad. If you need any sort of assistance, you need only call my office—the extension is thirty-three—and speak to a member of my staff. They'll be glad to help you with any

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problem which cannot be handled by the Matrons. Mail will be sent and received at my office, and if you wish to make any long-distance phone calls, my staff can assist you there, too. There are, of course, doctors on the field, in case any of you require medical attention."

"How about dates?" said a voice from the rear. This time, there was only a slight titter in the audience.

"I'm sorry about that," the captain smiled. "And if you think *I'm* sorry, you should see the long faces on the field personnel." He basked in their appreciative laugh. "I'm sure you all understand the reason for this restriction. Interplanetary travel is a civilian enterprise, of course, but subject to the same code as the armed forces. We're constantly under close scrutiny by the public—whether we're sending a new geological expedition to the outer planets, or staging a strict publicity venture, such as the Miss Outer Space contest."

He cleared his throat. "So you see," he said carefully, "we must keep the contest in a rather—respectable atmosphere. Harumph!" The girls tittered again.

"Now," he continued with a relieved sigh, "I'll tell you something about your agenda. You've all received copies, but some of the items may seem more demanding than they really are. As you know, we are not going to select Miss Outer Space on—shall we say, merely obvious qualities. This is not a beauty contest in the strict sense of the term. We want good-looking girls, of course," he said with a slight twinkle, "and you all fill that bill quite nicely. But we are also searching for other qualities which we believe Miss Outer Space should have. Intelligence—no, I don't mean we're looking for lady Einsteins," he said as a groan rippled through his audience. "I mean good common sense," he explained. "The ability to meet situations. Domestic know-how, too. The rudiments of keeping a decent home. Physical fitness. And something else, that I really can't define in a word. Character, I suppose, is as good as any."

He looked around the suddenly quiet room. "All these things will be explained to you more fully. I just wanted to let you know how grateful we are to you all for sticking by us as well as you have, and we hope you'll bear with us a few days more until the final

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judging is made. There'll be rewards for every one of you, I promise you that. No one will leave the spaceport disappointed, and one of you will leave with very rich rewards indeed. Thank you," he ended abruptly, and left the room quickly.

The redhead flung herself on a cot and groaned.

"What a day!" she said.

"It wasn't so bad," said Cleveland, looking in the mirror and feeling better about the looks of her hair.

"Wasn't that questionnaire a beauty?" said the blonde girl, this time wearing a purple sweater. " 'Please check your birth certificate when giving age,' " she quoted. "You know, I don't think they trust us."

"That domestic science test wasn't too hard," said the brunette.

"At least I didn't burn everything," said the redhead. "But did you get a load of that cooking equipment? I swear, I haven't seen junk like that since I went to an antique auction in New Jersey."

"Well, I guess they just don't have modern facilities—"

"You can say that again! Back home, we just put the food in the gadget, press the button, and whammo. This stuff is practically *primitive.*"

"Say, did you see the face on that Captain Lester when he tasted that strawberry cake of mine?"

"Gee, he's cute. If I was running this thing, I'd make it a law that nice-looking guys like him get Earthbound jobs—"

"That photography business was something. I haven't been snapped so much since that Shutterbug show in Chicago—"

"Hey, Janie, what happened to your second-looie? I didn't see him around all day. What'd you do to him last night?"

"No, we couldn't get inside the hangar, but we saw enough. Honest, that spaceship is a *dream.* It's so *white,* I mean, just like that sheath dress I packed—"

"Say when do we get a chance to wear some decent *clothes,* for Pete's sake? I'm sick of these damn shorts and halters—"

"Settle down, dear. Wednesday's the big day—"

"God, I'm tired! I don't know if I'll ever survive that endurance test tomorrow, whatever *that* is—"

"Lights out at nine tonight, girls—"

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"I'd give fifty bucks for some food right now. I'd even eat something I made myself."

"Who wants to be Miss Outer Space anyway—"

Second Lieutenant Hartwig set his shoulders squarely as he faced the ranks of women.

"The exercises will be held at the Spaceport Play Area," he said crisply. "That's not quite four miles from here. The tests will last about two hours, so if we make good time we can be back here before three."

"What about lunch?" asked a small voice.

"We'll get our lunch at the Play Area. It won't be anything much, sandwiches mostly. As I say, we must be back here at three, so you ladies can take your outer-space question period. That's the last phase of the contest, except for Show Night tomorrow, of course."

"How do we get there?" asked the redhead, in the front rank.

"We walk," the lieutenant said grimly.

"*Walk?*" A chorus of disapproval came from the girls, mixed with some resigned groans.

"That's right," said the lieutenant. "It's not as far as you think, and there'll be field wagons for those who are too tired to walk back after the tests. I needn't tell you," he added, "that walking back might count against your score. But it's your privilege."

"Nice guy," said the redhead bitterly, out of the side of her mouth. The blonde, Janie, who had dated him on their first night, looked hurt. "He *seemed* nice," she said. "He was so sweet about things—"

"Let's cut out the chatter," said the young officer. "Pretend you're in the Army now, girls. No talking in ranks, and let's have some semblance of marching order."

"My feet hurt already," said Maria

"This stinks," said the redhead tersely. "I knew I should have quit yesterday—"

"Not me," said Cleveland. "I got this far. They won't bully me out of it now!"

The field trucks drove back just fourteen girls from the Play Area. Lt. Hartwig was surprised at the low number, after his first hard-eyed appraisal of the women. But a hundred and sixty-six of them had stuck it out, with a perseverance that didn't quite fit his preconceived idea

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about the durability of young women—particularly the kind of young women who entered beauty contests.

But they stuck. They walked the four-mile distance to the test grounds with playful good humor. They took the hurdles of the obstacle course with only minor accidents. They joined in the water trials with gleeful abandon. And they even forgot their aching feet when the whistle blew for the running events.

The blonde that Hartwig had dated proved a frost in the first ten minutes of the exercises. She balked at the obstacle course, and pulled a fit of weeping. Hartwig himself helped her off the grounds, and tried to be nice about it. But she seemed to want to blame him for everything, and gave the young officer a tongue-lashing that brought a blush to his face. She sat out the rest of the field trials in a truck, waiting to be driven home. But that other blonde one, the pert one with the curls and the stunning figure, the one from Cleveland; now that was something more to Hartwig's liking. And the way she had taken the whole thing with such dignity and good grace. He'd have to talk with her on the way back . . .

"Okay, girls!" he called to them cheerfully, as they began the weary trudge back to the spaceport. "I know you're all bushed, but if we put a little pep into it, we can get back at two-thirty or so. That will give you some time to freshen up before the outer-space question period. You'll probably want to do some repair work on the makeup."

They made the march in less than half an hour.

Captain Johannson kept his eyes on the paper on his desk, pencil poised, as the pretty girl in the chair watched him anxiously.

"I'm going to ask you some unusual questions," he said. "So don't be surprised. You might call this a sort of 'psychological test.' "

The girl called Cleveland nodded.

"There won't be any pat answers, you understand. The outer-space questions, as we call them, demand more—inventive answers, you might say. So don't be nervous."

"All right," Cleveland said, none the less nervously.

"Here's the first question," said the captain. "Let's say you're in your own home, and the water supply is suddenly turned off. And you knew that it wouldn't work again

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for forty-eight hours. What would you do?"

The girl stared. "Why, I'm not sure." She thought a while. "I suppose I'd see if there were any water in the frig."

"Yes, of course," said the captain. "But what if you didn't have any refrigeration equipment?"

"Well, I'd see if there were fruit or vegetables around. I'd get all the juice I could find. I'd drink that."

"How about bathing?"

"I just wouldn't bathe. Not if I didn't want to be thirsty."

The captain smiled. "Now how about this," he said. "Let's say you've built yourself a house. Quite a nice house. Taken you a long time to build it. Then the foundation gives out for some reason, and your whole house collapses before your eyes. What would you do?"

Cleveland blinked. "Cry, I guess."

"Then what?"

"What *could* I do? Build another house, I suppose."

"I see." The captain leaned over the desk and made a notation on the paper before him. Then he looked up and said:

"Are you afraid of bats?"

"What?"

"Bats. You know, those winged things."

"I don't know. I don't think I've ever really seen one. Except in pictures, of course."

"Do you believe they get in your hair?"

The girl touched her blonde curls. "I don't think so. That's one of those fallacies, isn't it?"

"Do you know what a Martian bat looks like?"

"No."

"Well, picture a fairly ordinary bat. It's something like that, only its wing spread often reaches four feet. It's a pretty ugly customer. Now, let's say you're in your own parlor one night, and this big thing comes flapping into your house. And—fallacy notwithstanding—let's say you *know* this bat will just as soon land in your hair as anyplace else. Would you be frightened?"

"Of course," said the girl.

"What would you do?"

"Hit it with a broom," she said.

It was Show Night.

The trunks flew open, and dazzling gowns of silk and satin and nylon and orlon and sprylon were brought out, rustling beautifully. The long row of cabins on the

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edge of the Omaha Spaceport crackled with girlish excitement as the entrants dressed for the final judging. There were shrieks and giggles, screams and guffaws, cries of delight and of misery as the women struggled into their prettiest dresses. The sounds of their activity carried all across the spaceport, jangling the nerves—but not unpleasantly—of the personnel in the barracks at the other end of the field. It was Show Night, after all, the final moment when Miss Outer Space would be selected and crowned, and even the most hard-bitten veteran on the base caught some of the fever.

The Omaha mess had been converted into an auditorium—it was the largest single room on the field—and the messboys had contributed to the event with elaborate decorations, makeshift affairs of crepe and bunting and straggly floral bouquets. The clatter of folding chairs was deafening as they were lined up in uneven rows, in readiness for the audience. A heavy drape was strung against one wall, and spangled letters were tacked to it, spelling out: MISS OUTER SPACE.

It was a nerve-tingling moment, especially in the cabins.

"My God, what's that, a coffee stain on my sleeve—?"

"My lipstick! Who's got my lipstick? That's my special shade—"

"Ouch! I must have gained ten pounds since I wore this dress—"

"I'm just not *used* to high heels any more—"

"Poor Janie! If only she could have stuck one more day—"

"Honestly, you could give me *two minutes* at the mirror! Just two lousy minutes—"

"Just keep your eyes off that Hartwig fellow, Cleveland. It looks just a little too obvious—"

"Maria, would you *please* get your big—"

"Say, did you ever hear such a racket—"

"Those are *my* slippers, you dope! Can't you recognize the difference between a canal boat and a—"

"God, I'm so nervous I could die—"

"But honey, you look absolutely *ravishing!* I wish I could look *half* as good—"

"Come on! Come on! They're calling us—"

Captain Johannson stepped to the front of the stage.

"Ladies," he said gravely,

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"before I tell you the judges' decision, I have a rather important announcement to make."

The audience murmured, and then became still.

"When you first arrived at the Omaha Spaceport, I told you that none of you here would leave without some sort of reward. I meant that sincerely, and you'll find that I was telling the truth. But I have a different kind of prize to offer you ladies now, and I hope you'll pay careful attention as I describe it to you."

The audience stirred again.

"This has been a rather curious affair for all concerned," the captain continued. "On the surface, the Miss Outer Space contest may have seemed like a rather spectacular publicity stunt. It is certainly that. But we had another intention in staging this competition—a far more important intention, and one we have not revealed until this moment."

He looked directly at the women.

"Did you look up at the stars tonight?" he asked them. "It's a fine, clear night, and if you did, you may have seen the planet which is the core of the work of the Omaha Spaceport—the planet Mars. There are people on that planet now, people from Earth. They're all men—young men. The finest that the planet Earth can boast.

"These young men are performing some of the most important duties ever assigned to young men in the world's history. They are settling a new world for us—a brand-new planet, rich in mystery, danger, and untold wealth. They are living hard lives, and often short ones, to pioneer this new frontier. One of these days—perhaps many generations from now—our world will fall on its knees and thank God for the duty and the spirit which moved these young men to undertake this hazardous and lonely mission. Someday, an overcrowded and worn-out Earth will sanctify them for building a new home for the human race.

"You've seen some of these young men on your visit to this spaceport. They are typical of the men on Mars today—vigorous, intelligent, competent young men, well-versed in the sciences and the humanities. Take a good look at them. It may be the last time you will ever see them, for when the orders arrive

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that will take them to Mars, they shall not return again. This is a lifetime assignment.

"The men here tonight, and the men on the winking red planet above our heads have taken no wives and made promises to no sweethearts. The only offer they can make a woman is hardship, privation, danger; an unfamiliar world, and an unknown future.

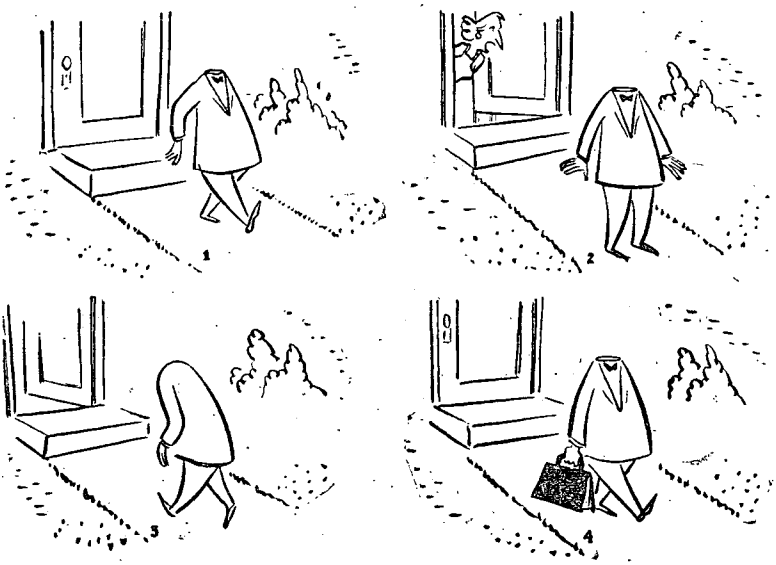
"You may understand why they are lonely. And you may now understand the unusual prize we offer you all.

"These young men have gone through trials similar to those you have undergone here—but far more strenuous and demanding. They are the cream of Earth's young men. We believe you are the cream of Earth's young women.

"So here is what we believe to be truly the grand award in this contest, ladies. A husband—a home—a new world—an adventure such as no women in history have had the chance to share. Think it over carefully. Let us know your decision.

"And now," he said, "the judge's decision."

Cleveland won, and she flung her arms about Lieutenant Hartwig when the decision was announced. She took the trophy with her to Mars. **THE END**



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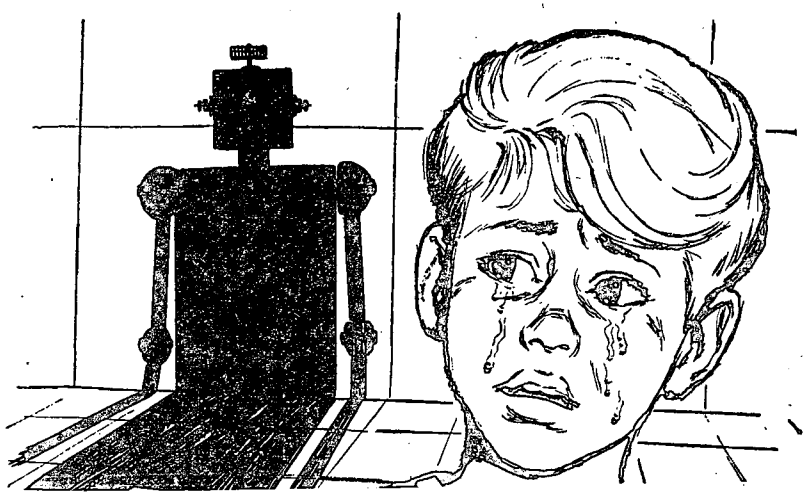

MY ROBOT

By O. H. LESLIE

HOW I wish Faw-Faw were here! What joy to be a child again, and sit once more in his strong wide lap, and rest my fevered cheek against the cool metal surface of his chest, and let my sticky, stumpy fingers play idly over the buttons of his back, and finally press down the one that brought forth his soothing, smoothing, story-telling voice:

"There was once a shoemaker who through no fault of his own had become so poor that at last he had only leather enough for one pair of shoes . . ."

Oh, Faw-Faw! What have they done with you?

Memory, memory. So sweet, so painful. What was the rhyme that Father taught me? The rhyme that told me how Faw-Faw worked?

"Information, registration, consideration,

"MEMORY!

"Calculation, conversation, robots made by

"EMORY!"

My father.

A big man. A *brilliant* man. And I was an Emory, too, and when I grew up, GREAT THINGS were expected of me. For didn't I have Faw-Faw? What child could hope for a better tutor?

Information, registration, consideration . . . MEMORY:

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Oh, Faw-Faw! How could I have ever hated your cold, cruel chest, your icy arms, your frozen mechanical affection! How could I have struck your brain-housing with such fury, beating the heavy hammer in great *gong! gong! gongs!* Yes, Father, I *deserved* your punishment. You were right; I was wrong. Again, again! Only beat me again! How could I feel such gross ingratitude? Again!

My mother . . .

"He's only a child!" Shrieking at him. *"He's only seven!"*

How soon his red anger died! Remorse, regret, eyes staring in bewilderment at the thick brown strap in his hand.

"He could have destroyed him," he said, in a voice I didn't know. "He could have smashed the work of a lifetime. Forty-four experiments —twelve years—and he could have—"

Oh, Father, how I wronged you! Again, again!

But how soon I learned. Cold steel or warm flesh—how little the difference really mattered! My mother's sleepytime kiss, once so sweet and comforting; my father's gruff hair-rumpling; how trivial these childhood pleasures seemed after the lessons of Faw-Faw, the strength of Faw-Faw, the quick thrilling response of Faw-Faw to every childish command.

Oh, Faw-Faw! How well I learned your ways!

Information, registration, consideration . . . MEMORY:

"A whole year?" I said.

"Maybe a little less," said my mother.

"It's a very important assignment," said my father.

"A great honor," said my mother, stroking my hair. As if to comfort me.

"It's a government project, and very secret. Can you understand that? Your mother and I will be living in very cramped quarters, and leading greatly restricted lives. There won't be any playgrounds, or children your own age, or anything."

"And besides," said my mother (was that a tear on her face?) "you'll have Aunt Hulda, and Faw-Faw of course."

"You'll be all right," said my father, as if he really knew.

Was I happy? Was I sad? Faw-Faw, do you remember? What did I say to you that night, in the aloneness of my room? Did I cry?

On the lap. Head against the chest. Press the button. Drowsy listening; soothing,

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smoothing, story-telling voice . . .

"Now the Queen, having eaten Snow-White's heart, as she supposed, felt quite sure that now she was the first and fairest, and so she came to her mirror and said . . ."

Information, registration, consideration . . . MEMORY:

"Say that again!"

"You heard me!"

"I *dare* you to say it again!"

"You're an orphan! I heard my mother say so. You ain't *got* no father!"

"You're a liar!"

"Who's a liar? *Who's* a liar? I'll show you who's a liar!"

A scuffle in the sand. A hard ball of fingers on my nose. Blood on my shirt. Yelling, screaming, crying: "I'm *not* an orphan! I'm not!"

"I'll learn you who's a (puff) liar! I'll show you (puff) little (puff) snotnose stupid orphan!"

Hot tears, shameless. Screaming, screaming.

"Faw-Faw! Faw-Faw!"

Pounding on my ribs. Then—

"Holy Christmas! *Holy—*"

Revenge, Faw-Faw, *revenge!*

"Ma! Ma!"

Hold him, Faw-Faw! Punch him, Faw-Faw! Bloody nose, Faw-Faw! Bloodier than mine! Revenge! Revenge! Faw-Faw, revenge! Information, registration, consideration . . . MEMORY:

"Oh, he's been a good boy, Mr. Emory," said Aunt Hulda.

"But he broke the nose of the Brown boy," she added.

"He did *what?*" said my father.

Would the thick brown strap, the sudden red anger, appear again? I cringed. But Father laughed.

"Well, well, *well!*" He laughed again, and squeezed my upper arm. I had pleased him! (Oh, Faw-Faw, I love you best, but that moment was sweet, sweet!) "He's a real Emory," my father said. "A real Emory! But don't tell his mother, Hulda. She wouldn't understand."

"It was Faw-Faw," I said. The honesty of childhood!

"Of course it was." My father smiled with pleasure at my robot. "He's a better teacher than I imagined. Now I don't feel so bad about leaving again."

My mother came in.

"Leaving again?" I said to her. Was I sad, Faw-Faw? Did I cry?

"The experiments aren't

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completed," my mother answered. "Your father and I will have to stay at least another six months."

Father said: "But it's worth it, son. There may be a whole army of Faw-Faws some day!"

"A whole army . . ." My mother looked frightened. "It's dreadful, Richard, dreadful . . ."

"Laura—"

"Metal soldiers. Robot killers—"

My father looked displeased. "This is no time for that kind of talk. You knew full well what my assignment was about. I'm not ashamed of it." He looked at me sternly. "And don't you be either. Some day you may be carrying on my work. Do you know that?"

My mother's face went white.

"My robots will do all the world's work," my father said. "Not just the fighting. But they know a lot about that, too." He turned his eyes on me again, significantly, and he smiled.

In the middle of that night, awakening suddenly, hearing an unexpected sound. My mother, sobbing, sobbing. My father, whispering, harshly, so close to red anger:

"Oh, shut up, Laura! For heaven's sake, SHUT UP!"

Oh, Faw-Faw, quick! Tell me a story!

The wide lap, the cool chest, the soothing voice:

"Once upon a time there lived a king and a queen, very peacefully together . . ."

Information, registration, consideration . . . MEMORY: Only a rhyme but . . .

"Sick, sick! With what? Tell me that. With what?"

My mother, drawn and pale. The plump hand that could touch so gently now thin and bony, clutching the sheet.

Softly: "I don't know, Richard . . ."

"The doctors should know, Laura. The hospital should know. Do you doubt what they said?"

"No. I don't doubt them."

Faw-Faw, why was I so frightened?

"They've seen cases like yours before, those Army doctors. They have an ugly word for it in the Army, Laura."

"Richard, I'm sorry . . ."

Anger, red anger. Would he take the thick brown strap to *her?* Oh, never, Faw-Faw, never!

"Two years of work! Two years—and now that pip-squeak Morgan is 'filling in' for me! It's just not *fair,* don't you see that? And all

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because you *think* you're sick."

"Richard . . ."

"Never mind, never mind. I've stood by your bedside long enough. Hulda can take care of you; you don't need me. You'll have what you want. You'll be home to smother that boy with sticky love. You'll be happy. *But I must get back to work!*"

Why did I cry, Faw-Faw? What frightened me so?

"Richard, please—"

"What is it?"

"Don't go back!"

"What?"

"Don't go back there. Don't help them make those monsters!"

My mother, up on her feet, following him to the door. She looked so small! Why, my mother was small!

"Don't be a fool, Laura."

"It's a *sin* to make them! them! A mortal sin—"

"Getting awfully religious aren't you? This isn't like you, Laura."

Clutching at him, tugging, pulling.

"Richard, don't go!"

"You're hysterical. Let go of me and get back to bed. That's the only place you feel important, isn't it?"

"I won't *let* you go. I won't!"

Tugging, pulling. Oh, Faw-Faw, why did I have to watch?

"Stop it, Laura!"

Shrieking, crying!

"Richard, Richard!"

Oh, Faw-Faw! Did it really happen? The upraised arm, that hard flat palm? The sharp, cracking noise? The moan or shock and pain? Oh, Faw-Faw! Did it really happen?

Revenge, Faw-Faw!

What have they done with him? Dismantled him, fused him, melted him, battered him, crushed him? Has his metal become bullets, gunbarrels, bombshells? Or were the bars on the window of my room once his strong cool chest, his sturdy legs, his comforting arms?

Oh, Faw-Faw, my robot. How I wish you were here!

THE END

BIG NEWS!

FANTASTIC IS *Going Monthly!*

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The thud of flesh and bone felt good against his fists.

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An Enemy of Peace

When enemies of peace threaten the System, they must be eliminated. There are many ways to do this. And if all else fails, you can always go to war with them.

By RALPH BURKE

CENTER CITY belonged to Lloyd Riddell, and Lloyd Riddell belonged to the city. He had held it together almost single-handed while the white blaze of atomics laid waste the horizon; he had turned panic into determination, defeat into dogged refusal to lie down. He had fought for the city. He had killed for it.

And now the city was threatened again.

"When does Northburg intend to attack us?"

"I—I don't know," Len Colter said. "It all depends on what's going on in David Barr's mind. I lit out for Center City as soon as I heard him making the speech, there in that rubbleheap. The minute I heard him yelling, *'We must wipe out Center City,'* I knew I had to come back here and let you know."

Riddell scowled. "I suppose you did the best thing. But you should have waited. You should have found out when they plan to attack."

"I'm sorry, sir, I—"

"Forget it," Riddell said sharply. "Get going. Get back to Northburg, scout around, find out whatever you can about this invasion. And send Ken Naylor in when you leave."

"Yes, sir."

The youthful spy turned and left. Riddell stared at the boy's back as he passed through the door, then studied the gold letters on the glass door that said *"Mayor of Center City"* in reverse.

He had come to Center City twenty years ago, a frighten-

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ed, lonely ten-year-old orphan with no place to stay. That had been before the Madness. Center City had taken him in, given him a home, foster parents, all the things denied him so long. Riddell had grown to manhood in the pleasant Ohio town. And when the bombs came, blasting America and changing it from the mightiest country on Earth to a coast-to-coast chain of small towns separated by dreary ruins, Riddell had repaid the town that had once found room for him. Alone, through the smoke-filled night, he had marched through the blasted town, collecting survivors, comforting the people. That night, he had kept Center City alive.

For what? Riddell asked himself bitterly. Did I save this town and rebuild it brick by brick only to have some power-crazed fanatics in the next town destroy it again?

He clenched his powerful fists. "I won't let it happen," he said. "Not while I'm alive. I'll stop Barr some way."

The office door opened, and Ken Naylor entered. Naylor was a big man, almost as tall —though not as broad—as Riddell himself. Riddell had met him for the first time the night of the bombing, and three years later they were still operating as a team.

"I've heard this thing about Northburg," Naylor said without preamble. "What's gotten into them? Are they crazy, trying to conquer America city by city?"

Riddell shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe they think they're going to start a new Roman Empire here in America."

"Do you think we can stop them? We're not too heavy on guns."

"We're not going to go to war, Ken. We're not going to fire a shot."

"What do you mean?"

"I've seen enough war, and I've killed enough men. We'll handle this the sane way. The way I'm trying to teach our youngsters to live."

Naylor stared blankly at him. "But—"

The phone rang. Riddell picked it up—listened— then said, "We'll have a man right over, Charlie." He hung up.

"Who was that?"

"Charlie Drew. On the farm about a mile out of town on the road to Northburg. I sent a couple of boys into Northburg last night, just to feel around and see how things looked. One of the boys was Len Colter, the one you just saw. The other was Ben

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Kingston. Couple of minutes ago, Kingston's body got dumped on Charlie Drew's farm. There was a note pinned to it. '*We don't like spies.*'

Naylor's face tightened. "And you say we won't fight?"

"There'll be no war. Get out to Drew's farm and pick up the body. Here—here's a permit to use my car." He scribbled a note that would allow Naylor to consume some precious gasoline. "When that's taken care of, move into my office and act as Mayor until I get back—*if* I get back."

"Where are you going?" Naylor asked.

"I've got to catch Len Colter before he reaches Northburg."

"But I thought . . ."

"I'll do the thinking, Riddell said. "You do what you're told."

Ten minutes later, Riddell overtook Len Colter, halfway to Northburg. "Go home," Riddell said. "I'm taking you off the job. It's too risky."

Disappointment showed in the boy's eyes. "But I got back safe the first time, sir!"

"I'm giving you an order!" Riddell snapped. "Ben Kingston was just found dead. I don't want you to go the same way."

"But—"

Riddell gestured with an upraised arm. "Don't stand here arguing with me, Len. Go on home!"

The boy turned away, moved slowly back toward town. Riddell watched him for a moment, then walked rapidly toward Northburg and the challenge there.

The road was still in good shape, despite pitted craters here and there, despite an occasional slagheap where a stray blast of atomfire had seared the hillside and sent molten rock spilling down on the highway. Grass was pushing up in the slagheaps, the blasted trees were being replaced by timid saplings, the farms along the way were starting to look like farms again. America was returning to life.

Two hours of war, Riddell thought for the thousandth time. *Just two hours of guided ICBMs overhead and a world is destroyed. But we're coming back, now.*

A feeling of hatred welled up in him. Hatred for David Barr, the madman who had inflamed the neighboring town of Northburg with dreams of conquest. Who now threatened to bring war back

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into a world already ruined by war.

Yet Riddell realized dismally that hatred was not the solution. The world was too battered for more hatred. He had vowed there would be no more fighting—but how else could you cope with a man who would enslave you?

There *had* to be another way to meet the forces of evil without descending to evil yourself.

As he walked through the quiet countryside, Riddell was plagued by the idea that had touched off the nightmare of 1973: *Get them before they can get you.*

It wasn't the answer he wanted.

Northburg was a rambling, sprawling town that had once been populated by fifty thousand people. Even after the bombings and the subsequent lootings, twelve thousand had survived.

Reports had filtered in to Riddell about the Northburg people, and he hadn't liked what he heard. This fellow Barr, for example—a wiry farmer who had pushed his way to the top, had taken charge of Northburg the way Riddell had Center City and the way strong men all over the country had probably taken over whatever town they were in. It was the only way to survive.

Only Barr wasn't like the others. Whereas Riddell wanted peace, prayers and prosperity for all the population of Center City, Barr was hungry for his own power and supremacy. After a lifetime of farming, suddenly he had control of a miniature kingdom, and he wanted more.

From the outskirts of the town, Northburg looked much like Center City or any other small town.

But a striking difference became evident as Riddell drew closer.

There was a wall around Northburg.

It rose some ten feet high, made out of row on row of gray bricks, and it seemed to encircle the entire city, turning it into an almost medieval-looking fortress.

"You going somewhere, friend?" a deep voice asked him suddenly.

Riddell turned and saw a man in a blue uniform approaching him, hand on holster. "I'm—I'm just out for a walk, sir," Riddell said, as timidly as he could.

"Outside the walls? Where's your permit?"

"Just a minute, sir," Rid-

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dell said obsequiously. He fumbled beneath his cloak, drew forth his wallet. "Here you are."

The guard peered close as Riddell flipped through his wallet, ostensibly looking for the permit. "Hurry it up," the guard said. "You ought to know better than to go outside the walls."

"Dreadfully sorry, sir. Oh, there it is."

He sent a slip of paper fluttering to the ground. Involuntarily, the guard turned to see what it was. "Hey, that's no perm—"

Sorry, Riddell thought. He ripped upward with a crashing right, followed with a left pounded into the guard's stomach. The man staggered backward. Riddell grabbed him by the collar, hit him twice across the face, and he folded.

Riddell let the unconscious man sag to the ground. Then he looked around.

No one had seen the encounter. The quiet farmhouses remained quiet, the cows in the field ignored the incident, and the cloudless skies did not seem to care.

Hastily, Riddell dragged the guard off the road into a thick clump of underbrush and stripped the man's uniform off. It was a tight fit, but he managed to squeeze into it. He tore his own cloak into strips, tied it around the guard's arms and legs, and adjusted his clothing.

Then he drew out the guard's wallet and examined it. He was now Corporal Edmund Calder of the Army of Northburg.

The new corporal Calder straightened up, cast a backward glance at the unconscious man in the shrubbery, and started walking towards the walls of the city of Northburg.

There was a gate in the wall about a hundred yards further along the curve. Riddell walked quickly, carrying himself erect in proper military fashion, and reached the gate.

He passed through, head down. The man on duty didn't seem to notice that anything was wrong. But as Riddell started to enter the city, the guard said, "Just a minute, Corporal."

Riddell whirled, then got control of himself. "Yes?"

"I forgot to ask you something," the soldier said. He was a private. He was staring full into Riddell's face, and if he knew that the corporal was an impostor he wasn't revealing anything. "The Major

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wants to know if any prowlers were around while you were on duty."

"No," Riddell said uneasily. "No, there wasn't any trouble at all. What's up?"

"Trouble from Center City," the guard said. "Seems a couple of kids got through our lines last night and slipped into the city. We caught one, but the other's still around somewhere. Funny you hadn't heard about it."

"I've—I've been on leave," Riddell improvised. "Just came back on duty a couple of hours ago, and I guess they didn't fill me in." Without waiting for any further discussion, he turned and moved onward.

Northburg looked peaceful enough, he thought. They had rebuilt pretty well, though the telephone lines still seemed to be down, at least in this part of town, and hardly any of the rubble-heaps had been cleared.

The townsfolk were going about their business. It might well have been Center City—except for the men in blue uniforms patrolling the streets, and the beaten, harried look on the faces of the people. There was *hope* on people's faces there in Center City. In Northburg, Riddell saw fear.

He had to get information. He didn't know how he was going to handle this, where to begin, what he was going to do—but he knew he would have to eradicate this cancer spot from Ohio for the sake of re-awakening America, and he knew he would succeed.

He started down a large thoroughfare that looked as if it might once have been the main shopping center of Northburg. No cars moved down it now—not with gasoline rationed out for top-level priority only—and there was the occasional clippety-clop of a pony-cart drawing produce to market somewhere on the other side of town.

After about fifty feet, he came to a bar, and smiled. Bars were the best places to get information. He went in.

"Morning, Corporal," the barkeep said as he entered. It was small, cozy, with some tables in the back and a well-polished bar along the wall. "What'll you have?"

"Beer," Riddell said. He accepted the drink and looked around the bar. There was a little group of men in uniforms sitting at one of the far tables, and quickly he turned his back so they would not see him. To his left, a couple of middle-aged farmers nursed

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their drinks and seemed to be glaring bitterly at him.

He studied them. *They don't like the soldiers,* he thought. It was indicative of the sort of feelings in the town.

He listened carefully, trying to pick up some threads of their conversation.

". . . this crazy war," one of them was saying. "What does Barr want to go conquer the world for?"

"Quiet," said the other. "This place is full of his soldiers. You want to spend the rest of harvest season in jail?"

The first farmer had evidently had a couple too many. He raised his voice. "I don't care if they do hear or not," he said thickly. "This is America, isn't it? *Isn't it?*"

"It used to be. Shut up, Clyde. We'll get in trouble."

Riddell felt his pulse quicken. *Here's my opening,* he thought.

Downing his beer, he dropped a coin on the bar and turned to confront the two farmers. His hand slipped to his holster.

"Hey there, you two!"

"You mean us?" the meeker of the two farmers said. "We didn't do anything!"

"It isn't what you did," Riddell said loudly. He flicked an eye at the bartender and saw the man staring white-faced at him, livid with hatred. "It's what you said." He gestured with his holstered gun. "Suppose you two come along for questioning, maybe."

One of the soldiers from the back table detached himself and came to the front of the bar. "Any trouble, Corporal?"

Riddell looked at his uniform, saw that the other was a sergeant, and shook his head. "I can handle it, Sergeant. Thanks anyway. Come on, you two."

He marched the farmers out into the street, which was still blessedly empty, and indicated that they should go to the end of the block and turn in at the side street. They did so and waited there, faces white, teeth chattering in terror.

"Okay," Riddell said. "Would you care to repeat to me what you said about the government of Northburg?"

"We didn't say anything."

"Yes we did," said the outspoken one. "They're going to put us away anyway, so we might as well speak up." He stared defiantly at Riddell. We don't like you, and we don't like Barr. And we don't

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want war. It's—it's *madness.* Why can't we rebuild the country the way it used to be? Why—"

"That'll be enough," Riddell said. "You're speaking treason, you know. Such words can condemn you."

The two men began to quiver. Riddell looked with pity on the one who hadn't spoken, the one who had desperately tried to silence his friend before it was too late. A scowl came to his face. Barr was ruling with an iron hand here, but there was a chink in his armor. The people didn't want this war.

Riddell grinned. "Tell me something. Where can I find David Barr?"

"What? But you're a—"

"Don't mind the uniform," Riddell said. "Better keep your voices low. You're not arrested. I want you to tell me where Barr is."

"This is a trick, Clyde. He's trying to trap us."

"We already *are* trapped," the other farmer pointed out. "Who are you?" he asked.

"The name is Riddell. Of Center City. I want you to tell me where I can find David Barr, and then I want you to go home and stay there."

"Riddell? I've heard of you. You're the—"

"Look, friends, I can't waste time—*talk!* Where's Barr?"

"His headquarters is at the corner of State and Main—three blocks down. You can't get to see him, though."

"Don't worry about that," Riddell said. "Just go home and keep quiet. Maybe by nightfall things will be different in Northburg. Let's hope so."

Cautiously, he made his way down Main, heading for the big brick building, that was undoubtedly Barr's headquarters.

He felt encouraged with the realization that Barr's influence was based on a grip of fear. It was infinitely more easy to destroy a tyrant than to try to change the mind of an entire town.

These people wanted peace—but Barr drove them on to conquest, putting guns in their hands and uniforms on their backs. Riddell planned to stop it.

Suddenly, a trumpet sounded. Riddell looked up, startled, and stood still.

"Attention!" a blaring voice cried, from what seemed to be a thousand loudspeakers. *"Attention! All off-duty members of the Army of Northburg are to assemble outside GHQ at once for com-*

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bat briefing. Plan 102 is to be accelerated."

Riddell rubbed his jaw. That meant they probably had found the stripped guard outside the walls, and knew that another Center City spy was loose somewhere in Northburg. It meant they would probably launch the attack on Center City ahead of schedule. Riddell started to move at a fast half-trot. He didn't have much time now.

Soldiers in blue were appearing from all over as he reached the Headquarters—which had once been, Riddell observed, Northburg City Hall. *He's got half the town militarized already,* he thought, seeing the swarm of blue-clad soldiers.

He trotted up and filtered into the milling group outside GHQ. "What's up?" he asked the man nearest him.

"Barr's calling a briefing session," the soldier said. "Didn't you hear the announcement?"

"I was—busy," Riddell said, grinning sheepishly. "Must have missed it. We having a change of schedule?"

"It probably means we'll march on Center City tonight," the other said. "Don't know why they're shifting plans."

"Spies," said a third man. "Center City's catching wise. We're going to have to beat them to the punch. I hear they've had Northburg honeycombed with spies all week."

"Yeah?" Riddell asked. "Hell, I thought our defense was tight as a drum."

"Tight as a sieve, you mean." The other lowered his voice. "You know, I've been hoping this day would never come," he said unexpectedly.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Don't repeat this—but I still can't quite swallow everything Barr says about Center City planning to jump us for months, that we have to strike first. It doesn't sound right, somehow."

"Brother, you can't trust those Center City people," said Riddell. "If Barr said it, Barr means it. You shouldn't be talking like this, you know."

"I know. But I've wanted to get it off my chest for a long time, and you look like you've got an honest face."

Riddell grinned. "That's the most dangerous kind, pal." He turned away and stared around at the growing army. *So that's the story Barr's been dishing out? That explains his hold over these*

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people. He's got them all scared stiff of us!

Suddenly, Riddell knew that Barr could be stopped—that this whole juggernaut could be kept from going any further. Barr's machine was built on a quicksand foundation.

The trumpet sounded again. Everyone looked up automatically. On a little balcony on the third floor of the building, a man stepped out. He was thin and wiry, with a browned, weather-beaten face, and even at this distance Riddell could see the fierce blaze of power-lust in his eyes.

The man on the balcony was David Barr.

Riddell broke away from the crowd of men he was in and pushed his way through them toward the door of the former City Hall. A row of sergeants stood at the entrance.

"Where you goin'?" one of them asked.

"Got a message for Barr. Just came back from a spy-mission to Center City, and I've got information he's got to have!"

The sergeants looked at each other uneasily, as if not sure whether to admit Riddell or not. He paused just a moment, then shoved past them and into the building.

"Hey! Come back here!"

Riddell ignored the shout and disappeared into the dark lobby of the building.

A staircase beckoned. He sprang up the first flight, met an armed guard posted on the landing. The guard started to say something, but Riddell charged furiously on through him, knocking him reeling.

"Stop that man!" someone shouted.

He looked down and saw several of the men who had stood at the entrance dashing after him. Riddell grabbed the first-floor guard, lifted him in the air, and hurled him down the staircase into the midst of his pursuers. Then he turned and continued ascending.

There was no further trouble till he reached the third floor. There, he stood looking around for a second, heard the sound of Barr's hoarse, rasping voice coming from the left, and raced down the hall.

He came to a halt in front of an office-door guarded by another soldier.

"What do you want, Corporal? Why aren't you downstairs?"

Without replying, Riddell drove a fist into the man's

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stomach. He gagged and doubled up. Riddell pushed him aside, opened the door, stepped in, and turned the lock.

A voice was threatening from the balcony. "Our enemies in Center City threaten our very lives!" Riddell looked up. The window was open, and standing there delivering his harangue was Barr. Riddell watched him. He was a remarkably small man to be wielding so much authority.

The sound of footsteps echoed in the hall outside, and Riddell heard a shoulder crash against the unyielding oak door. There wasn't much time.

He took a step forward—and stopped.

He stood there, staring at his hands. He was frozen.

He had killed for Center City before, had calmly fired shots into a swarm of fear-crazed looters who were sacking the bombed city, had executed criminals with his own hands in the name of the city. And he had vowed never to kill again. He swore the rebuilding would be accomplished peacefully.

Yet up ahead was David Barr. A bullet in the unsuspecting demagogue's head and it would all be over. But Riddell couldn't do it that way.

He hovered there in indecision for a fraction of an instant before the answer came. Mere bloodshed was not enough—but violence was sometimes necessary in the cause of peace. It was a paradox whose truth was inescapable.

He stepped forward. His decision was made.

Barr broke off his speech and whirled. "Who are you? Guards! *Guards!*"

"They're not coming," Riddell said. "Your door's so solid they can't break in. We're here alone."

Barr's thin hands moved swiftly toward his hip, but Riddell moved also. Barr's gun came up just as Riddell's fist crashed into his arm. A shot whined across the room and buried itself in the luxurious panelling, and Riddell reached out and knocked the gun from Barr's fingers.

Again Barr screamed for his men. And from below came a loud roar, a shout of defiance. Riddell smiled. The soldiers sensed that someone had broken into Barr's stronghold.

"Let him have it!" yelled somebody. "Kill Barr!"

"We don't want to fight another war!" shouted another. Riddell glanced down and saw the soldiers, divided.

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Barr crouched in the far corner. "Leave me alone, don't touch me."

Slowly, Riddell advanced across the room toward him, while the noise from below grew deafening. As he approached Barr, the small man suddenly whipped a knife from his jacket and circled around Riddell.

"I'll kill you," Barr said.

He broke off and launched a savage leap at Riddell. The knife flashed harmlessly through the air as Riddell sidestepped and grasped the other's arm. The two men locked together for a moment, and Riddell could see the hate in Barr's eyes.

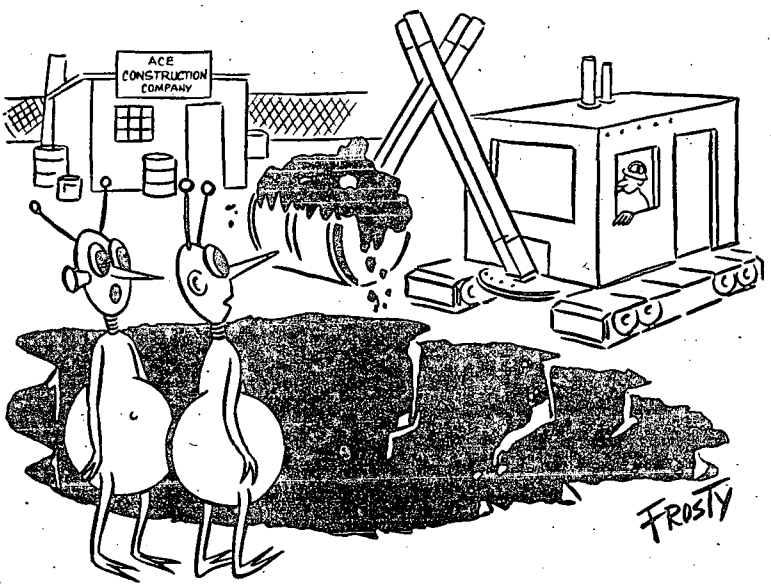
Suddenly he knew Barr had to die. Riddell had killed in the name of peace before.

He forced Barr back, twisting the wiry tyrant's arm until the knife dropped. Barr squirmed and clawed viciously, but Riddell held him.

They approached the balcony. *"Don't!"* Barr yelled.

Riddell felt utterly calm as he lifted the wriggling Barr and hurled him over the side of the balcony. A mighty roar went up.

He knew he had committed no crime, it was an execution, rather. Barr was dead, and with his death another enemy of peace had perished. **THE END**



"They must have lost something."

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A KISS FOR THE CONQUERER

By CLYDE MITCHELL

From our innermost planet to the farthest reaches of space, one man plus one woman equals—well, read Mr. Mitchell's story.

"TONIGHT'S the night," Bolgar said.

He ducked his head to catch a glimpse of his face in the particle of mirror hanging on the barrack wall. It was a lean and hungry face, the hollows in the thin cheeks disguised by the three-day growth of stubble.

He could see Sgt. Pulley's sneer reflected in the glass.

"You think I'm joking?" Bolgar pushed the long black hair over his ears with the palms of his hands. There were few combs in the world.

"I think you're nuts," Pulley said from his bunk. He was wearing a ragged T-shirt. The medal, with its shrieking eagle green with rust, looked ludicrous pinned to his chest. But Pulley wouldn't part with it.

"We'll see," Bolgar said

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grimly. "Can I use your razor?"

Pulley shrugged. "Once more won't matter. I'd give a thousand credits for a straight-edge and a strop."

"Fat chance," Bolgar said. He peeled off the coat of his gun-metal gray uniform and flung it on the bed. Then he went to the brown-spotted sink and turned the only faucet that worked. The trickle of icy water that emerged ran copper.

"Ion gun," he said crisply.

Pulley extracted the device from his waist, and tossed it to his barrack-mate.

Bolgar ran a count on the water. It was clear.

"Razor," he said.

Pulley threw that, too. The metal was as rotten green as the man's eternal medal. Bolgar looked at it disgustedly, running a thumb along the blade without breaking skin.

"Couldn't cut lard," he said with a snort. But he started the painful shaving process.

Pulley watched in fascination. "You really got it bad," he said wonderingly. "Taking a chance like that, for one lousy kiss. What's so hot about this dame?"

"I can't explain it. She's a looker—but it's more than that. I been watching her parade around, swingin' her little—" He cut himself and swore. "I stopped to speak to her once. There was something in her face—the same kind of thing you see in *all* their faces—"

"Yeah," Pulley said bitterly. "I know the look."

"Do you?" The other man turned around. "What do *you* see? Hate?"

"Yeah. What else?"

"No." Bolgar shook his head and stared moodily at himself in the sliver of glass. "It's not hate anymore, Pulley. The hate died out of 'em a long time ago—right after the war, right after the contamination . . ."

"They hate us," Pulley stated flatly.

"I don't think so. I think it's something different now. Something worse." He began to shave again. "Contempt," he said.

Pulley's right hand balled into a fist and struck his knee. "We shoulda killed 'em all! We shoulda wiped 'em out!"

"I asked her for a match," Bolgar said dreamily. "Just a lousy match. She stared at me like I was some kind of microbe. Then she wraps her damn cape around her face like she didn't want to let me breathe on her." His growing anger caused his hand to

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tremble; he cut himself a second time.

"So you're gonna kiss her?" Pulley sneered. "Why don't you throttle the gal? Why don't you beat her up? Or haven't you got the guts?"

Bolgar turned the anger on him. "Watch yourself, Sergeant!"

"Pulling rank?" It was a jeer.

"Shut up!"

Pulley swung his boots to the bed. "Okay, pal," he chuckled. "Have it your own way. You're asking for the same amount of trouble—whether you kiss her or kill her—"

"I'm going to kiss her," Bolgar said vacantly, dabbing at his face with a grimy cloth. "I'm going to wait for her by the mess hall. She comes out of quarters on Barton Street every night around ten o'clock. She cuts across the square, over to Pitcher Street. It's pretty deserted there, that time. I'm gonna jump out and—"

"Operation kiss," Bolgar laughed, toying with the medal on his chest. "The last victory of the war . . ."

Bolgar slipped into his coat. The unbleached cloth was shabby and threadbare, but the buttons were still bright and gleaming. The insignia of the 505th Army caught the light in the room brazenly, the iron hand clutching forked lightning. He had medals, too, and they jangled as he buttoned the coat up to its tight collar. At least, he thought, his medals were worn where they belonged.

"My!" Pulley said mockingly. "You look pretty, Lieutenant."

"Where's my cap?"

"On the hook, behind you."

Bolgar put the cap on his head, squaring it. He stepped back from the glass to determine its correctness.

"Beautiful!" Pulley said.

"All right, knock it off! What time is it?"

"Twenty of ten. Better get goin'. Your girl friend's waiting."

"I'm going," Bolgar said, strapping on his watch. He clanked to the doorway of the barrack, but turned before going out. "This place stinks," he said. "We got to clean it up one of these days."

"Sure," Pulley said lazily. He flopped over on the sagging bunk and turned his head to the wall. "Have a good time, Lieutenant." His chuckle ended in a yawn.

The area was deserted, just as Bolgar knew it would be.

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He walked quick march towards the mess hall, hoping that he would be unobserved, regretting now the cluster of medals on his uniform. He knew that these tokens of battle were officially frowned upon; but he also knew that there would be added satisfaction in crushing the hard bits of brass and iron against the girl's heaving chest . . .

He ducked behind a building when he heard footsteps.

Two women passed him, speaking in low tones, their skirts rustling in the silence of the night.

He held his breath until they were gone, and darted out from concealment, walking more rapidly towards his destination.

The mess hall wasn't a hundred yards away from the wire fence that marked the safety limit. Even from where he was, he could see the red-lettered sign that warned conqueror and vanquished alike away from the radiation-contaminated zone.

Bolgar suddenly remembered that he had forgotten his ion gun. The thought troubled him only slightly. He had more vital things on his mind.

It was an odd revenge he was after.

The mess hall was a looming black shadow, facing the rows of sagging-roofed shacks that stretched out for a third of a mile. It was *their* quarters; seedier, uglier, far less equipped to withstand the brutal weather than the barracks; yet somehow, warmer, friendlier, happier-looking. He hated the sight of them.

He dived into the enveloping darkness behind the mess hall, stealing a look at the illuminated dial of his watch. He began his vigil.

In a few minutes, *she* would appear.

Time went slowly.

Then he saw her. She was giving murmured good-byes to the people with whom she visited night after night. Now it was time to go, half an hour before the sound of curfew.

He saw her arms adjusting her cape over her head, in the age-old motion of women.

Now she was walking hurriedly away from the shack, across the square, her low heels slipping on the loose gravel.

There was a moon, and its light struck her face gently, softly highlighting the sad loveliness of her features.

When she was some twenty yards away, Bolgar started after her.

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He walked lightly, on his toes.

She didn't hear him until it was too late.

His hand went out, and his fingers whipped the cape from her shoulders to the ground. One arm snaked her waist, the other arched smoothly in front of her.

But she was struggling, her foot kicking out forcefully.

"Just a kiss, baby!"

He leaned over her, laughing, and replaced the hand over her lips with his own hungry mouth.

The kiss was savage; beyond the force of love or sexual appetite. It was a blow, a crushing onslaught, a blitz of the emotions.

"You—*animal!*" she cried.

"Listen—"

"Help!" she screamed.

"No—you don't understand—"

"Stop!" he shouted.

He turned around, frantic at the sounds that were gathering behind him. He saw the figures coming towards them.

When the hands closed around him, he went limp and silent, and allowed himself to be led away.

The tribunal took action quickly.

The guards, with their rifles firm against their chests, looked at him with neither hate nor animosity.

The judges were less dispassionate.

"Lieutenant Bolgar?"

He stared over their heads.

"Janice Damon?"

The girl stepped forward, still sobbing.

"Yes—" she said. "He's the one. He's been watching me. I know it. I've seen him hanging around the quarters."

The woman in the silken uniform looked solemn.

"You were given many privileges, Lieutenant," she said crisply. "But it would seem that *men*—" she said the word with loathing—"must always take advantage of their privileges. Do you have anything to say?"

He shook his head.

"It's greed, you know," the woman said confidentially. The other women of the tribunal nodded in agreement. "Greed's the downfall of *all* men. How many wars do you have to lose before you realize that?"

He said nothing.

"Send him to the breeding camp," the woman said carelessly. "He'll pay for his kiss."

She looked at the girl sympathetically.

"Your lipstick's smudged, dearie."

THE END

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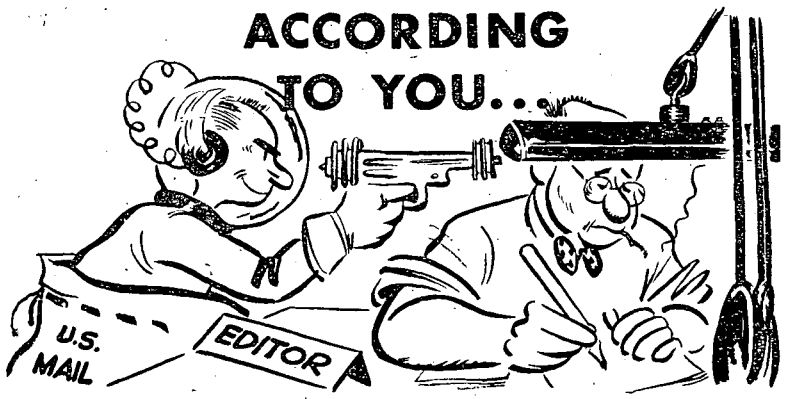

BY THE READERS

Dear Ed:

The December issue of *Fantastic* was very enjoyable. As I've often stated before one can escape into the so-called impossibilities with good old *Fantastic.*

Your new publication PEN PALS sounds like quite an unexpected deal. Am eagerly awaiting it on sale date.

W. C. Brandt
Apt. N
1725 Seminary Ave.
Oakland 21, Calif.

• *PEN PALS is now on the stands. No doubt you already have a copy. How many pen pals have you contacted so far?*

Dear Editor:

After reading your letter section in the December *Fantastic* we were surprised to note the number of people interested in joining science-fiction clubs. So to the fans of the Dallas area we wish to extend our welcome to join the Dallas Futurian Society, but let's not stop in this immediate vicinity. We welcome anyone else in the country to become an associated member.

Albert Jackson
3435 Lawther Dr.
Dallas, Texas

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• *Before too long, you'll probably find quite a few members through* The Space Club, *a new feature we're running in* Amazing Stories. *There's a copy on your local newsstand.*

Dear Ed:

I love reading *Fantastic* and all science fiction for that matter and there are rarely any stories that I do not enjoy. There was one story in the December *Fantastic* that was exceptionally good and very enjoyable, however one thing about it puzzled me. We all know how the King what-ever-his-name-was existed through all those thousands of years that he was thought dead, but how did the friend and sorcerer, Ahnku the Ancient exist while his King was buried for many thousands of years? I mean, how did Ahnku preserve *his* life?

Mrs. Gary Lynn Young
7827 Goll Avenue
No. Hollywood, Calif.

○ *Well, it came about this way, Mrs. Young. You see this Ahnku character was a very remarkable chap. He was able to stick round so long because—ah, well because he had a—(aside to secretary). Tell Clyde Mitchell we want a few words with him the next time he comes in. A couple of questions about a story he wrote for us.*

Dear Ed:

I picked up a copy of the December *Fantastic* at the 14th World Science-Fiction Convention and read through it when I returned home. Here's what I thought of it:

As Ted Sturgeon so aptly put it, "90% of science-fiction is crud. 90% of *everything* is crud." I must say that I agree with him, and this applies to *Fantastic* also. But *Fantastic* publishes some of the best crud in the business.

My favorite story was Robert Silverberg's "Choke Chain." An ingenious idea, Bob. Could have been handled a little better, especially the ending, but I enjoyed it thoroughly. The twist at the end added to my enjoyment of the story. No wonder he stood up so well, but why did he have to breathe?

Second place is a three-way tie between "The Chimp" by Henry Slesar (more power to him, more stories from him) "Man of Many Bodies" and "Death Rattle" by O. H. Leslie.

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Whoever this Leslie is he wrote a mighty fine yarn. Oops—a four-way tie, Jorgensen's "Coward's Death" represented a fine story of time travel. I'm afraid "The Mummy Takes a Wife" was at the bottom of the list in my estimation. What a confused mish-mash.

About the letters: What's the matter with the letter writers nowadays—too lazy?

Cartoons were all good, more, more!

Leslie Gerber
201 Linden Boulevard
Brooklyn 26, N.Y.

● *Comments noted and checked. More cartoons coming up. We thought "Mummy" was a hilarious piece. According to circulation, so did thousands of others. However, maybe you'll be crazy about the lead story in the next issue and they'll think it's not so good. That's life.*

Dear Editor:

The December issue of *Fantastic* was the best since the August '56 issue.

"The Mummy Takes a Wife" made me roar with delight. "Death Rattle" was one of the best short-shorts in one long time. The rest were also enjoyable.

And now about *Dream World.* I can't agree that it will get thin. It will answer all of man's dreams. The thought of such a magazine makes me think: Can't wait to get my hands on it.

Edward Gorman, Jr.
119 1st Ave., S.W.
Cedar Rapids, Iowa

● *The first issue of* Dream World *will be on the stands December 11th. Grab a copy and let us know your verdict.*

Dear Editor:

"The Mummy Takes a Wife" was simply darling. Frankly, the front cover speaks louder than words. Exciting. But the ending sort of ruined it like it has some of the other good novels in the past.

I, myself, am for a good beginning—always. A masterpiece can make itself mighty weak in the middle, but can build it-

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self back up to originality on toward the end. When the ending is bad, the story is no longer any good.

James W. Ayers
609 First St.
Attalla, Alabama

○ *Shoot us another letter, Mr. Ayers, and tell us what was wrong with the ending. We're interested—seriously.*

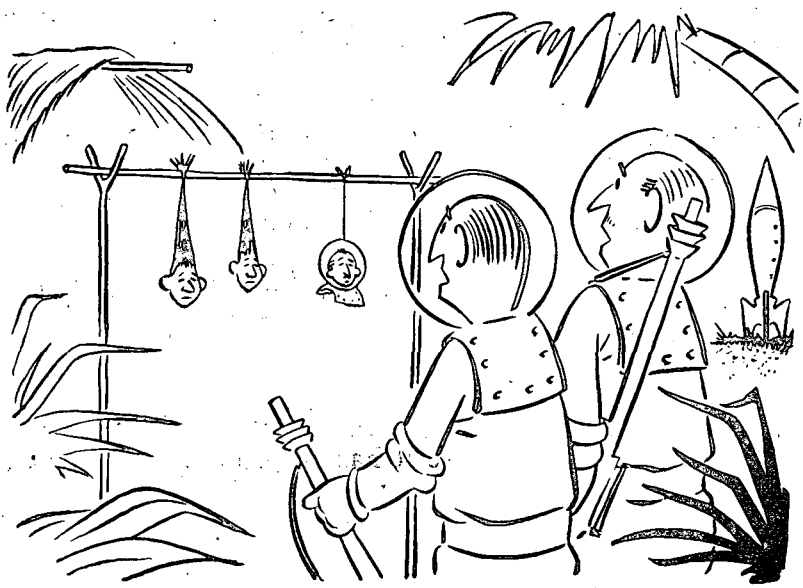
Dear Editor:

I am a new science-fiction fan and have just finished reading my second issue of *Fantastic* which I enjoyed immensely.

"Choke Chain" and "Man of Many Bodies" were great as well as "Coward's Death." I am looking forward to more new issues of *Fantastic.*

Stanley Teitler
90-36 149 St.
Jamaica, N.Y.

○ *We've got Mr. Silverberg doing more yarns like "Choke Chain." We thought he had an extremely original premise.*



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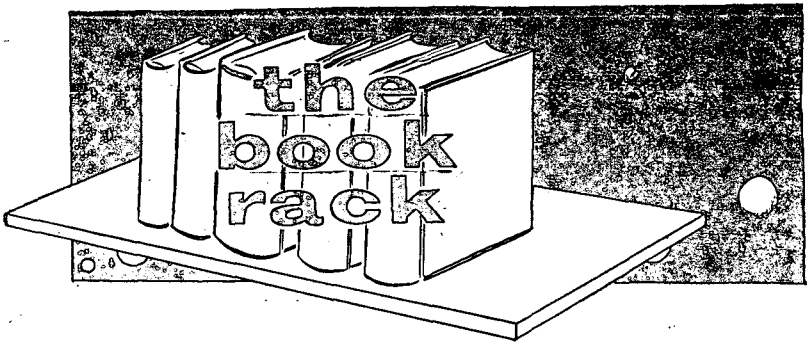

By VILLIERS GERSON

TO LIVE FOREVER. *By Jack Vance. 185 pp. Ballantine Books. Cloth: 2.75; Paper: 35¢*

In the world of the far-distant future, the supreme reward which society can grant to its creative minds is the gift of immortality. Smaller rewards seep down to those men and women who are merely gifted, talented, or normal: the granting of a life-extension which doubles the life span. But there is a price to pay, for since it is the state which has granted the extension, the state can at will revoke its citizens' lives—and does so through a corps of Assassins.

It is unthinkable that life be ended otherwise—yet there is one unspeakable man who is both a murderer—and an Immortal. His name is John Warlock, and it is with his adventures that this s-f novel is concerned.

More carefully constructed than most science fiction efforts, "To Live Forever" has one serious defect: its careful extrapolation and construction is limited to a society, rather than to the one man in whom the reader becomes interested. We are never sure of John Warlock's drives or the reason for his sometimes irrational behavior. It is as if the author changed his mind about his protagonist several times during the writing of the book.

Yet "To Live Forever" has impact, contains ideas as well as action, and forces us to re-examine several of our pre-conceptions, particularly those regarding the sanctity of life. I can't agree with all the author's conclusions, but such a shaking-up

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is good for every reader, particularly when accomplished in so entertaining a way.

THREE TO CONQUER. *By Eric Frank Russell. 224 pp. Avalon Books. $2.50*

Wade Harper, inventor, engineer, and micro-technician, possesses an uncomfortable gift—he can read people's minds. A sagacious and practical man, he knows what the discovery of his ability can mean to him, so he conceals it until, on one murder-and-tension-filled day he brings his gift out into the open to protect humankind. Only Wade Harper can detect a strange life-form, an intelligent virus from Venus, which is bent on taking over the Earth by making human beings unwitting hosts.

Though his attack on the invaders costs him his friends, his safety, and the respect of his associates, Harper persists in his task—until he is in turn discovered by the invaders. Then an already fast-moving novel moves into high gear.

For this type of thriller, too exhaustive an exploration of protagonists and antagonists is unnecessary, for it is ingenuity and pace which counts—and "Three To Conquer" has both. A welcome first issue from a new firm which promises to release a new science-fiction book each month.

THE SHRINKING MAN. *By Richard Matheson. Gold Medal Books. 35¢*

Richard Matheson has demonstrated in the past that he has few equals in bringing the prickle of fear and awe to the nape of the reader's neck. Once an expert skater on the thin ice of underplayed horror, with "The Shrinking Man," Matheson has taken a resounding pratfall.

The theme of this novel is that old cliché—the man who, for some imperfectly understood reason, shrinks until he is a midge in a world of Titans. In the proper hands, even so old-hat an idea as this can be made into something resembling the themes of the Grand Guignol, but somehow Mr. Matheson was led astray. He has accepted every comic book idea from the Cunning of the Creeping Cat, to the Menace of the Monstrous Spider, to the Cruelty of the Callous Child. The result is a second-rate and disappointing effort.

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 (Continued from page 29)

her to say, prob'ly. But now we want the truth!"

"But you know as much as we do. We've told the truth—as much as we know!"

"Now we ain't as big fools as you think, Mrs. Parker—"

"I tell you we've—"

Dan Parker pushed forward. His eyes were slitted and ugly. "Don't tell him anything, Jane. Not another damned word." Dan pushed close to Bates and the latter fell back a step from his eyes. "I want to ask you just one question—are you calling my wife a liar?"

Bates hesitated and turned to Schultz for help. He had not expected quite this show of belligerence. Schultz refused to become involved however. He said, "Now wait a minute, Ceec. I don't know anything about this. Besides it isn't my job. Mayor here's nothing but an honorary office anyhow." Having stated his case, he backed away also as Dan Parker moved forward and pressed Cecil Bates back against the crowd.

Bates said, "Now look here, Dan, I'm duly constituted law around here!"

"You're a damn snooping busybody and nothing more!"

"I got a right to investigate and find out if the law's been violated. You know there's laws against abusing a child—"

Dan Parker's fist cracked against Bates' half-open mouth. A tooth snapped and Bates kited backward. But he did not go down because there were three men behind him who had come for the excitement. They threw him back into the fray, one of them yelling delightedly, "You going to let him do that, to you Ceec? You're the sheriff. Nobody ought to poke the sheriff around."

Dan swung again, but Cecil Bates dodged and scurried to the side, opening up a space that gave him time to draw his gun. His eyes were cleared of fear now and there was a little sneer on his battered mouth. "All right, Dan! You want to get gunned down? I can do it. Assaulting an officer. And I got witnesses!"

Bates' trigger finger tightened. There would be joy for him in the bullet he aimed. But at that moment someone in the crowd yelled, "You're on his property, Ceec. You got a warrant?"

The statement was thoughtless and by sheer chance but it probably saved Dan Parker's life. It made Bates realize his case might not be con-

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sidered legally clear in a courtroom.

But he could not bring himself to a complete loss of face. He said, "You're going to jail, Dan. I mean it. One more move and I'll kill you."

This satisfied the volatile elements of the crowd. "Sure! Throw 'im in the can, Ceec! Show 'im who's boss!" By golly! Sage Bend hadn't seen such excitement in twenty years and maybe there'd be more! The two cow pokes who had met Bates in the lunchroom congratulated each other with happy grins. What if they had gone out early and missed all this?

Jane was clinging to Dan's tense arm. "Darling, go with him. Do as he says. It's better than being killed." But his fist remained closed. He was on the verge of pulling away from her when she whispered, "We've got Biddy to think of!"

The fist relaxed and the arm dropped. Dan said, "Okay, *Sheriff*. Let's go."

As Bates followed Dan down the street toward the jail, his gun held importantly level, there were comments from the crowd. "Pretty cocky for a guy with his neck out. . . . Acts as innocent as all get-out, don't he?"

The remarks stiffened Cecil's courage. He'd done the right thing all right. The crowd was behind him. They respected him. It wasn't bad being sheriff after all.

His ego rose pleasantly, but only to be knocked flat three minutes later in front of the jail. As the disordered crowd moved up the street, a group of riders—perhaps half a dozen—rounded a building and came into the street at the far end. They moved forward and were waiting in front of the jail when Cecil Bates arrived with his prisoner. Bates lowered his gun and the crowd fell into silence as old Sam Taber sat on a big black in front of his riders and surveyed the scene.

Sam Taber had that about him which signified authority even where no authority was vested. He was the kind of man people stopped and looked at. Slim, cold-faced, and gray-eyed, he had at once the manner of an aristocrat and the wary attitude of one who had met suffering and danger along the way and was on the alert for more.

After a full minute of silence, he asked coldly, "What is this?"

Bates said, "I'm arresting this man."

"Why?"

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"For resisting me — an officer."

"Why did he resist you?"

"I went to his house to ask him some questions and—"

"And what?"

"He slugged me."

"What questions did you want to ask him?"

"About Biddy—his little girl."

"What did she do—rob the bank?"

Laughter bubbled in the crowd and Cecil Bates had a sudden helpless feeling. "No, Sam. You see I was up real early this morning and—"

More laughter and someone remarked, "Glory be! He was up at dawn looking for lawbreakers."

"—I met Biddy Parker riding out on her burro."

Sam Taber waved an impatient hand. "I got the story—what there was of it. One of my men brought it to me this morning. That's why I'm here."

"Then you'll back me up."

Sam Taber rifled a contemptuous look at Bates. "Put that popgun away. You've got no more case than a jackrabbit. I'll ask the questions around here."

The crowd was silent and Cecil Bates stood alone and the humiliation was gall. He holstered his gun muttering, "You got no right to do this Sam. You got no right to make me look foolish."

Taber probably did not hear the words. His eyes leveled over the crowd. "Seems to me the little girl's story bears looking into. But you fools have yourselves a picnic while this unknown man may be pointing all hell at you from out in the ridges."

Bates snatched at the statement. "Say, Sam—you might have something there. That's what I was trying to get at in the first place—"

Taber cut in. "Come on back to your place, Dan. I want to talk to you."

The crowd melted away as Sam Taber and his silent riders moved toward it. Sam Taber held the black in and rode beside Dan and Jane Parker as the cavalcade moved up the street. Sam said, "I understand Biddy rode off this morning."

Dan Parker said, "That's right. We were waiting for her to come home so we could—" Dan shrugged. "Then that crazy crowd showed up."

Jane's hand tightened on Dan's arm. "She's home! There's Buck in the corral. She's home, Dan!" And Jane was running on ahead . . .

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"I won't tell you," Biddy said, firmly. She had now analyzed the little fear she'd felt upon awakening that morning. Now she knew the reason for it. With the inherent wisdom of childhood, she knew that the grownups would not understand Joe—would not realize how wonderful he was—better than Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Hopalong Cassidy, and—yes even than Davey Crockett all put together. They wouldn't understand that at all, and the way grownups were, something bad would happen and Joe would be hurt. "I won't tell you, where the cave is or anything more about it."

Dan's eyes mirrored annoyance and frustration. "Now listen here, Biddy—I don't want any more of this nonsense—"

Jane put an arm around Biddy's shoulders and drew her close. "I think she's right," Jane said quietly.

Dan flared in surprise. "Well of all the—"

Jane's eyes swept both her husband and old Sam Taber who was sitting quietly on the teetery straight-backed chair, his gray eyes never moving from Biddy. "I'm sick and ashamed at the way things have gone," Jane said. "Last night I saw my daughter come home and walk across this room without need of the brace that had become the horror of my dreams. I saw her made whole and beautiful by some miracle beyond my knowledge and I wanted only to get down on my knees and thank God. I knew only happiness all the long night and then I awoke to—" Jane swept her hand hopelessly. "—to this. A snarling mob. A near murder. A town suddenly filled with hate and a love of lawlessness. Biddy saw none of this and yet she knows that this healer of hers—real or imaginary—would not be thanked for what he did but probably murdered. She knows this and I love her for it." Jane drew Biddy close. "Don't tell them, dear. Don't ever tell them a thing."

Dan Parker stood open-mouthed at his wife's long declaration. Sam Taber got to his feet and his eyes held only admiration. He said, "I understand, Jane. And I agree with you it would be like turning a sheep to a pack of wolves."

"Thank you."

Sam stood looking thoughtfully at his hat as he turned it slowly in his fingers. "Just one thing," he said suddenly.

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"Would you mind if I examined Biddy's leg?"

Jane was surprised at the sudden turn of his mind but she said, "No, of course not, Sam."

Sam Taber dropped to his knees as Jane slipped off Biddy's little slacks revealing a pair of tight white panties and two perfect legs. Sam raised the left leg gently, like a holy relic and ran gently fingers down the straight, smooth surface. "The main damage was done above the knee, wasn't it?" Sam asked.

"Yes, the muscles were pinched and destroyed. There was only the bone left—and enough ligament to—"

"Davey's is that way too," Sam said. "But his goes even higher—into the hip." Sam matched the legs gently together and muttered, "I'm trying to believe. I'm trying so damned hard—"

"You shouldn't have to believe, Sam," Jane said.

He looked up at her dully. "No?"

"No, because Davey is your boy."

"Yes—that's true."

"And when one comes to the end of belief there is faith to carry one further."

Sam got slowly to his feet and now seemed suddenly weary. He spoke softly as though to himself. "I should not need faith. After all, I've put my finger in the wound—" He looked at Biddy with his characteristic suddenness. "Biddy-baby—perhaps your friend in the ridges—maybe he would—"

Sam stopped, floundering—suddenly out of his depth. All his life he had been a proud man; never in his life had he asked anyone for a favor and even though it was for Davey, he did not know the process of asking.

Perhaps he would have got the words out even then, but before Jane could help him, another fear blocked the way—Dan Parker's fear. In his mind he saw Davey whole and unbroken, riding the saddle Dan Parker now rode. And while he hated his selfishness—recognized it for the evil and the criminal weakness it was—he still instinctively blocked the way—spoke the words that stopped Sam Taber's plea: "I think you'd better lie down a while, young lady. Get some rest. You were out too early this morning."

It was an inconsequential barrier, but enough to straighten Sam Taber—bring his natural coldness to the surface—end his plea. He

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turned toward the door. "You might as well take the rest of the day off, Dan. Won't be much work done today anyhow. See you tomorrow morning."

Then he was gone; into the black's saddle and leading his quiet riders out of town.

They watched him from the door and Jane said, "That was cruel Dan. And you did it on purpose. I know you did. A boy's life restored against that miserable job of yours."

Dan Parker knew inwardly the shame of his weakness but he hid it behind surliness. "Well, somebody's got to look out for Biddy. You'd be perfectly willing to let things go to hell and then moan because there was no food in the house. Somebody's got to be practical." Dan snatched his hat and without another word headed for the tavern . . .

Art Haney had never had it so good. He chuckled and took another swig from the bottle Cecil Bates offered and thought by God it was about time this town gave a poor blind man a break.

Cecil Bates leaned forward and took the bottle back. He didn't want this old souse to get plastered and thus become useless. He said, "So you met this guy out in the desert, eh, Haney?"

"Sure did. At least it was a stranger because I know every voice in these parts. You see when a man's blind like I am, his sense of hearing gets almighty sharp and you take notice—"

"Yeah, I know. Now he walked along with you and took you to the cave he's got out there?"

"Nope—he didn't take me—well, not very far. I'm no slouch in getting around even if I am blind and nobody ever helps me. I go out in them ridges sometimes just to sort of hear the quiet sounds. You see a blind man—"

"I know—I know. So you were out there and—"

"And he said hello. We got to talking—"

"What about?"

"Oh, just this and that. It was getting almighty hot and I asked him if he could give a poor blind man a little something to drink."

"That was when he took you to the cave."

"Uh-huh. It was only about fifty feet from where I was. He took me inside and gave me a swig of the damndest stuff you ever drank. Had a kick to it, but not like any whiskey you ever drank."

Cecil pushed the bottle into

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his hand. "Try another belt of this."

Art was highly agreeable. He wiped the neck with a filthy hand and said, "Thank you, Ceec. You're mighty good to a poor helpless blind man."

Bates let him take a fairly long one, then retrieved the bottle. "And you say you can show me the exact spot where this guy's cave is?"

"Sure can. Only—"

"Only what?" Bates scowled and pulled the bottle back as though to keep from wasting any more good liquor.

"Only that it might be kind of rough on you. I'd have to walk it. Wouldn't know where we was going if we drove. And a blind man taps along pretty slow."

"Never mind that," Bates said grimly. "I'll tap right along with you. I'd crawl across the Gila Desert to get that guy. I truly would, Art."

"All right then. Let's get started."

Cecil Bates grinned. He'd show old Sam Taber what the score was; who was sheriff around here and who wasn't; who could go out and bring in a criminal while everybody else talked about it . . .

Davey Taber had special foot controls built into his jeep. This gave him a great deal of freedom—access to all the roads roundabout and to any part of the desert on which a jeep could travel.

Davey was a handsome youth with none of his father's characteristics of leadership. He had a rather long sensitive face with eyes made dark and beautiful from suffering. His hands were the slim delicate hands of an artist.

He had driven off the Circle-7 toward Sage Bend but when he came within a few miles of the town, he turned away from the road and into the flat desert. There was a strange restless stirring inside him, a hope that was almost akin to pain because he had heard the story of the mysterious man in the ridges and of what had happened to Biddy Parker. If he could only find the man—if the story were only true—if—There were a dozen ifs bouncing through his mind as he wound aimlessly over the hot expanses. If he could only—

He pushed down on the brake and came to a stop as he saw a spot across the waste, his sharp eyes telling him what it was. A small flop-eared burro and a little girl leading it.

Biddy Parker! Davey

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screamed the jeep into motion and headed in that direction. As the intervening distance lessened, Biddy stopped and waved a welcome.

The jeep came to a halt and Biddy ran toward it. "Look Davey! I can walk! I can run!"

"I heard. Somebody came to the ranch this morning with the story. Dad went into town."

"I saw him and he talked to me."

Davey's eyes asked the question. "What—?"

Biddy dropped her own eyes. "I—I wouldn't tell anybody where Joe's cave is, Davey."

"Joe?"

"He's the man who fixed my leg. He comes from the sky bloc. He's a wonderful man and I was afraid they meant to hurt him."

Davey had inherited one thing from his father. Pride, and now his face fell as the hope died within him. "Oh, I see. Well, you were probably right. There are some pretty crazy people around these parts. But I'm glad you found him and got cured. It must be pretty nice to walk and run again."

Biddy came quickly forward and laid a hand on Davey's arm. "I didn't mean that I didn't want you to see Joe, Davey. In fact I talked to him about you and he said he might be able to help you too."

The gratitude in Davey's face was eloquent. "He did?"

"Uh-huh. Joe is just wonderful. We'll go there tomorrow—just me and you and Joe will fix your leg."

Biddy saw the disappointment her words brought. Davey said, "That would be just wonderful."

"You see its quite a long way from here. I came in the opposite direction on purpose in case anybody followed me. I didn't want to lead them to Joe and now it's getting pretty late."

Davey glanced at the sun. "Uh-huh. Sun'll be down in fifteen minutes."

"And I've got to get home or Mom and Pop won't like it. They'll be cross."

"Sure—a little kid like you shouldn't be out on the desert at night."

"I'll meet you tomorrow, though. Let's see, where—?"

"Any place you say, Biddy."

Biddy thought it over very carefully, then suddenly bubbled with the warmth that was a part of her nature. "Davey—we won't wait. We'll

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go now. It will be way after dark when we get there because I can't leave Buck and he can't go very fast on his short legs, but we'll go anyway and see Joe tonight!"

Davey's hands trembled. "But what about your folks?"

Biddy shrugged. "Well, I'll be with you and you're an old person so that ought to make it all right."

"Well—"

"Anyhow, let's worry about that later. You make the jeep go real slow and I'll ride beside you. I can make Buck go faster that way."

"All right."

So the strange little cavalcade started slowly off across the desert. Biddy prattled on as she rode the phlegmatic Buck beside the jeep and Davey's heart sang a song within him, a crazy, ecstatic song: *We're looking for Joe. We're riding over the night desert hunting for him. And maybe we aren't the only ones. Maybe everybody in the world is stumbling through the darkness looking for Joe.* What Davey's heart was saying made little sense to his mind. But he did not question its source. He was only twenty-one and not a wise philosopher so he completely overlooked the wisdom of his instinct . . .

Cecil Bates sat in the Sage Bend tavern celebrating his luck and preparing for his triumph. This preparation consisted of spreading the word because his very nature demanded witnesses or there would be no triumph at all.

"So you know where this foreign invader is, eh Ceec?"

"Sure do." Cecil emptied his shot glass and tapped his forehead with a knowing finger. "Used my head. Used my head, I did."

"Old blind Haney led you right to the stop, huh?"

"Almost as close as I am to you. Now nobody'd think a blind man could do a thing like that—nobody but a man who uses his head like I do."

"You sure are smart Ceec. You say you actually saw the machine he's going to blow us up with?"

"Not us, I don't think. I think the rat's after our space station. Now what better spot could they pick? Visibility clear as a bell out here—"

"Think he's from the Eastern Bloc, Ceec?"

"Course he is. Where else could he come from?"

The voice of a more logical hanger-on came from somewhere in the greatening group. "But it doesn't make sense to come over here to

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do it. Too risky. They've got deserts over there—just as good visibility."

Cecil was annoyed. Always some guy goofing things up. "Is that so? Well listen to me. Just what in the hell do you know about the mechanics of space-fire and locations and—and things? Seems to me you take a mighty lenient view of things in general mister. It sure does."

"Gosh, Ceec — I didn't mean—"

"Then keep your trap shut." Cecil Bates glanced around. Plenty of people here now. Quite a crowd. "Me—I'm going out and get him. I'll have him back in town in an hour. We'll show those rats we got pretty alert law around here."

"You going alone, Ceec?"

"Sure am." Bates got up and walked importantly toward the door. There, he stopped and turned. "Course, if a body of citizens tagged along to see how justice works, I guess there's nothing I could do about it." He grinned and winked.

A shout of approval went up and last drinks were hurriedly slopped down and additional quickies ordered. Then they followed Cecil Bates out into the street, moving with drunken anticipation of excitement.

Loaded with the dynamite of irresponsibility.

They streamed out of town behind Cecil Bates' car, not stopping to get other cars or mount horses for fear of being left behind. There was no danger of that however. Bates was not eager to face the strange man in the cave without some show of force in his wake so he traveled slowly enough for all to follow . . .

Dan and Jane Parker stood on their porch watching the town empty out into the desert. Jane said, "Dan! You must do something. They're—they're dangerous!"

Dan Parker frowned. "But it's not my job. Cecil Bates is the sheriff—"

"Bates is a slovenly, dishonest—*hoodlum*. You know that Dan. They'll do something out there—"

"What? What will they do? Bates is just going out to arrest that man for questioning and I think he's got a right to do it."

Jane Parker looked at her husband in new surprise. There was something in her face that had never been there before. A look he would have done well to heed. She

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said, "Dan—I just don't understand you any more. This isn't you. There's an—an evil coming into you."

"That's nonsense. Just because I won't stick my nose into the sheriff's business—"

"At least do this for me, Dan. Go out and tell Sam Taber what's happening. If Sam refuses to act, then I'll be satisfied. But go and tell him."

Dan Parker's mouth twisted in anger and helpless frustration. "So you think Sam Taber's a better man than your husband? So you have more respect for him than you have for me?"

"I'm afraid I do—at the moment." Jane spoke quietly and there was a distant regard in her eyes. "Will you go, Dan? Or will I?"

"I forbid you to go kiting off across the desert—"

"You go, or I will."

"All right—I'll go."

Jane stood in the yard watching the tail light of the jeep fade off toward the Circle-7. There was a stark misery in her heart—a bleak unhappiness she had never before known. It's not Dan—not Dan at all!" she whispered fiercely. Then she ran back to the porch and sat down on the steps and began to cry.

But not for long. She came erect suddenly. Biddy was not home yet! She was out there in the desert. A drunken mob was moving out there somewhere. With a choked cry, Jane Parker ran off into the night. After a while she began calling—"Biddy—Biddy baby—where are you? Where are you?"

But the stars were silent and the night was silent too . . .

Joe had heard the sounds of the approaching crowd. He came from the cave where he had just got the report of zero-minute two hours away and waited in front of the cave. He looked up into the heavens from where, very shortly, a small, dark ship would arc in and settle quietly down.

The headlights of the car leading the crowd cut two paths through the night and he stepped out into their radiance. Instantly an unpleasant voice barked, "You there! Stand still. Don't move. I've got you covered."

From curiosity rather than fear, Joe remained where he was. The voice and the harsh discordant vibrations from the crowd in the background fascinated him. What sort of a demonstration was this? What strange primitive mo-

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tivations generated the black aura about these people?

A scowling figure emerged from the gloom and peered over his shoulder into the cave. "What you got in there?"

"The equipment I brought with me."

"Where'd you bring it from?"

The mob was straining forward to hear and a baleful silence waited to be broken by Joe's answer. "From the Galaxy — well, the Galaxy Capital I suppose you'd call it."

"Where the hell's that?"

"I don't think you could understand if I told you."

"Is that so? Well, I'm not as stupid as you think, buster. You've snuck in here from the East somewhere. You've been pretty damn clever, but no Eastern fifth column is going to get a foothold in my territory. You come along with me. You got some questions to answer."

An ugly tremor went through the crowd. It raced from drunk to drunk and influenced even the sober. Fear mixed with panic.

"See that stuff in there?"

"Lousy Eastern fifth columnist.

"Brought his equipment with him."

"Bet it is something to blow up our space station just like they said."

Cecil Bates expanded under the reflection of these revelations. He'd shown them all right. He'd brought them out here and shown them what was going on and what he was going to do about it. He said, "All right—come on you —into the car and right down to the jail house."

As Joe hesitated, four men came out of the crowd. "You heard what he said. Get going," and they laid rough hands on Joe and carried him bodily away.

But they did not stop at the car. The raucous-voiced leader of the group yelled, "Don't worry, Ceec. We'll get him there for you. Don't need no car. We know where the jail is!"

The spark was touched off —the thought suggested—by a blurred voice from the crowd. "We don't need no jail house. What we need's a rope!"

Laughter — ugly laughter — and other suggestions: "There's the tree by Indian Head Rock. About big enough to hold a rat his size."

More drunken laughter but laced now with viciousness and excitement. Shouts and

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curses rising into a steady roar. A lynch mob.

Cecil Bates never quite knew how it happened. He made no resistance because he lacked the courage and he was afraid to defend the prisoner. After all, he rationalized—when he saw how things were going—these were the people, the taxpayers, the hard core of the country. They had an instinct for knowing when swift action was necessary. And by gosh, when it was time, they acted!

But he realized these were only weak alibis for his own impotence and that he was held helpless by his fear, his inner rottenness, his lacking of stature as a man.

And when they took the stranger and hung him to the tree by Indian Head Rock, Cecil Bates looked himself in the face for the first time in his life and was sickened by what he saw. He screamed at himself—*do something. For God's sake don't let this happen. That man hanging there is you. When he dies you've come to the end of your rope too. But there's still time. Do something. Stop them.*

But the weakness he had nourished and fed within himself for so long would not let him raise his voice or his gun. And he stood alone with his sickness watching the body of the stranger twirl gently at the end of the rope someone had brought along just in case . . .

Sam Taber and his riders prowled the dark desert and the desert was a big place after sundown. Finally he pulled up and said, "I can't figure this thing out. Bates must have used a car. Why can't we see the headlights?"

"Maybe he turned them out so as to slip up on the man in the dark." This from one of the men in his group; men who obeyed orders and seldom spoke.

"With the whole town and half the county tailing along behind him? I think not."

A different voice: "There, boss. Look. See the glow?"

Sam's gray eyes pierced the night. "Sure. That's Bates. We swung in the wrong direction. Should have gone to Sage Bend and started from there."

"The light's at Indian Head Rock."

"Let's go."

They swept across the desert, thundering up a dust cloud that hung in the night behind them. Rode until sight of a terrible thing sent a chill

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down Sam Taber's spine; sight of a man hanging from a rope against the glare of a car's headlights; a silhouette of savagery that killed the last faint hope in Sam Taber's breast; the last hope for a crippled son.

Sam fought to control himself as he and his men rode silently, gently, into the lighted circle. He struggled there in the saddle with the red rage that tried to flare up from the stormy heart of him; the uncontrollable anger he had fought all his life and thought he had conquered. The mob was now looking at its handiwork in silence, each member wishing himself somewhere else.

The roaring in Sam Taber's ears drowned this silence as he reined up and one of his men rode close to the turning body. The man's hand went out. He said, "Too late, boss. We're too late."

Taber sat like a dead man for a full minute. Then his rage broke its bounds and flooded out through his eyes and his throat across the desert. "Take them!" he bellowed. "Take every last rotten mother's son of them! Lash the swine down! Cut them to pieces!"

He stood up in his stirrups and bent forward and lashed out with his quirt. Without question his riders went into action. Quirts rose and fell, slashed and cut. Screams and bellows and curses arose on the dark desert as the shadowy avengers moved into their bloody work.

The mob broke to run bellowing and screaming in all directions. There was no leadership now, no courage to rally them for a stand against their tormentors. The only thought was to get away from the slashing quirts; to run off into the desert and hide like squealing rats in the blackness of a safe hole. To find sanctuary.

But just in the middle of the terrible savagery, a cry went up from one of the riders. "Hey. Over there! The boss! He's down!"

The riders turned from their work and converged upon the indicated spot where Sam Taber hung limp in his saddle and was just ready to slip from his mount's back. They spied him just in time.

Two of the riders cut skillfully in and caught the lolling body. "What's wrong, boss? One of 'em get you?"

Taber's reply was tortured, throaty. "Heart. Heart's gone —bad. Can't—breathe. Done —all done."

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"We've got to get him to town—quick!"

So, as quickly as it had come the avenging force moved back into a group and thundered away. Cecil Bates had got to his car during the melee and rammed it in panic through the crowd and off into the desert. The mob itself had melted like tallow in a blast furnace.

And now there was nothing —no one from the rising moon to see except the still body of Joe hanging from the tree beside Indian Head Rock . . .

Biddy Parker kicked a heel into Buck's flank and said, "Davey—the light's gone out now. I wonder what it was. It wasn't the moon."

"No, the moon's coming up over there. Probably somebody parking in a car and then they drove on."

"But we didn't see the lights move away."

"No. Well, you say we go right by there. Maybe we can find out."

"It's not very far. We'll be there soon."

The moon came up in desert splendor and the landscape brightened. The rocks threw shadows and for all purposes it was the light of day.

Shadows of rocks. And another shadow as Biddy and Davey approached the place. The shadow of—Biddy reached over and touched Davey's arm. "Look—Davey! Do you see—?"

"I see it. A—a man! He's hanging from the tree there. Biddy. He's killed himself—or somebody has—"

"But nobody is around. I wonder who it is." Biddy's heels beat a veritable tattoo on Buck's little flanks and the burro went into a reluctant trot. Closer they came, closer, until Biddy cried, "Davey—Davey — it's Joe hanging there!"

"You mean the man we're going to find?"

"Yes — yes. He's dead! Davey—somebody did this. Joe would never—"

"That's not important now. See if it's too late!"

Biddy slid off Buck and ran to the tree. She could just reach the waist of the hanging figure. She began to cry and turned a streaming face to Davey. "I—I can't help him! I can't even reach! There's nothing I can do!"

"And I'm helpless too! Davey had tears in his eyes too—tears of anger as he reached for his two canes and tried to struggle from the jeep.

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"You can't, Davey! You'll hurt yourself!"

Davey stopped. "Wait a minute, Biddy. Do you think you could climb the tree and go out on the limb and cut the rope?"

"I haven't got any knife."

"I have. Here—do you want to try?"

"I can do it."

"You'll have to hurry. Every second may be important."

"He'll hurt himself falling maybe."

"Skin up that tree. I'll swing the jeep around under him. It will break the fall and then we'll take him to a doctor. Hurry."

Davey backed the jeep in under the body while Biddy climbed resolutely carrying the knife between her teeth. She got a little dizzy but she closed her eyes and when she had wriggled far enough out on the limb, she cut at the rope until it separated.

At that moment, two things happened. The body fell heavily into the back seat of the jeep and the car itself went completely dead. The motor died, the lights faded slowly and the glow of the moon illuminated the scene.

As Biddy climbed down from the tree, Davey kicked again and again at the starter. There was no sign of life in the battery. Biddy came to the car and Davey stared at her blankly. "Something happened to the car. Even the starter won't turn over."

"Try—try again!"

Davey pressed the pedal and finally gave up. "It's no use. The crate's letting us down when we need it most."

"Then we've got to use Buck. We've got to get Joe to where he can get help."

"But—but he's dead."

"No! No! Joe can't die. We've got to take him back to the cave!"

"Why there?"

"I don't know. I just know that's where he'd want to go and we've got to get him there."

"I suppose it's the best place. Nobody in Sage Bend would help him I'll bet. They're—"

"We've got to get him on Buck."

"You'll have to go alone. I can't walk fast enough."

"You can ride Buck too. Pop says a burro is one of the strongest animals there is. And it isn't far. Hurry. You've got to help me."

Somehow they pulled and tugged the body onto the back of the sleepy burro. Then Davey clambered on, balanc-

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ing precariously on the animal's hips. Biddy took the reins and pulled Buck into movement and the strange cavalcade moved off across the desert.

Half an hour later, Biddy cried, "There's the cave and some people are there. And they've got lights."

Davey was craning his neck. "Look—look at that funny looking thing. It's—it's a ship of some kind."

As they crawled slowly up the hill toward the rocks, they saw great activity. There were half a dozen young men moving from the strange ship into the cave and back again. As Buck came into the circle of light, two of the men came forward.

They gave the body hanging limply over Buck's back their entire attention. They spoke to each other in some strange language and then the rest of the group were crowding about.

"We found him hanging from a tree," Biddy said a little fearfully, but they paid no attention to her.

They lifted the body from the burro and held it partially erect. After a short conference one of the men hurried to the ship and returned with a small tube that somewhat resembled a fire extinguisher. He pointed it at Joe's chest and pressed a button and a thin blue flame crackled as it seemed to penetrate the flesh.

In a matter of seconds, Joe coughed, opened his eyes, and was standing without help. One of the men, frowning slightly, snapped a question in the strange language. He spoke at the same moment Biddy ran forward and cried, "Oh, Joe! You're all right. You aren't dead! We found you hanging there but I knew you were still alive. I just knew it!"

Joe smiled at her and laid a hand on her head. He ignored the other men, giving Biddy his attention as he said, "I'm a lot harder to kill than you would imagine."

Davey had struggled forward on his crutches. He said, "But how on earth could you have lived? That strangling rope around your neck—"

"I suppose this is Davey," Joe said.

"That's right," Biddy assured him. "We were out looking for you."

"As a matter of fact, Davey, the rope didn't hurt me at all. It was something else. I was knocked out completely by the chaotic vibrations flowing from the crowd that hung me to that tree.

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I'd have come around soon."

"You mean they—lynched you?"

"If that's the term."

The young man who had spoken would not be put off. He was respectful but insistent as he said, "We threw out the power block. It has been in effect for almost an hour. The time has come for you to speak and then we must take off."

For some reason he had spoken in English and Joe answered in kind. "All right. Let's get it over with."

Another of the young men said, "You don't seem very optimistic about it."

Joe's face was grave. "I'm not. I've learned a few things since I set down here." He turned to Biddy and Davey. "Would you like to come inside?"

He accompanied his pace to that of Davey and when they were inside he seated them near the shining box and then took his own seat in front of the control panel. And while the others stood back with their arms folded, he turned several dials and then spoke into a screened speaker in the machine.

"People of the world—for the last hour your planet has not been functioning. All mechanical means of transportation has been at a standstill. Your electric currents from pole to pole have ceased their flow. Your homes have been dark. This inaction stems from a force-barrier we have thrown up around your planet. As a result, your generators have stopped producing electricity—"

Wide-eyed, Davey whispered to Biddy. "That was why the jeep's motor died."

Biddy's eyes were like saucers as she nodded—not understanding, but fascinated by Joe and his cold, grim manner. He went on. "This was done for two reasons—to demonstrate a small segment of our power, and to bring you to your receiving sets. They are no doubt all turned on as you wait for their silence to be broken."

Joe rubbed an unconscious hand across his throat and paused for a moment. "I am breaking that silence now. I represent a council of planets beyond your solar system and I have been sent here to give you an ultimatum. We have watched you for a long time—watched with sympathy and complete good will as you struggled upward through your evolutionary periods. We liked much of what we saw, sympathizing with you

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in your mistakes and rejoicing with you in your successes.

"Then we saw your scientific development outstrip your moral advancement and your sense of responsibility. We watched you fight in caves with clubs and stones—with bows and arrows—with gun powder and atomic fission. And always we hoped your hostility would give way to common sense and mutual respect if not mutual love.

"But this did not happen. Each new discovery you made was qualified through a single question: How many more will it kill at a time? You moved out into space with your man-made stations and we hoped that finally you would awaken and your hostilities fade into history."

Joe's face was sad under its grimness as he paused to choose his words and tension rang through the cave. "But no—you ran true to your basic hateful pattern. You fought in your caves and on your seas and in your seas—on your land and under your land. And now you propose to carry your stupid useless wars out into space. I have come to tell you that this, you will not do.

"Up to this point, you have endangered only yourselves but now the balance of the galaxy can be tipped by your madness and this we will not tolerate. I care not who is right or who is wrong in your disputes. I do not look upon you as a divided world, I look upon you as a single indivisible planet and looking thus—this I say to you."

Joe took a deep breath and plunged grimly on. "If one of your space station attacks the other for any reason whatsoever, both will be destroyed. And in this destruction your planet will also vanish. It will be obliterated completely as we have no intention of leaving a dangerous dead hulk floating through space. It and you and possibly your whole solar system will go at once because—no matter what your opinions on the subject are, let me tell you this—*you are expendable—your planet is expendable—your solar system is expendable—and on the day after obliteration—you will not even be missed.*"

Joe turned in his chair and Biddy thought he looked awfully tired. Then he said, "And now if you have any doubts go out, wherever you are, and look up into the blessed skies God gave you—" Biddy watched the sadness

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in Joe's eyes and heard him speak as though to children. "—the skies we will take away from you unless you grow up and behave yourselves."

With that, he snapped off a switch with a quick movement and turned. He said, "Go outside and ready the ship for takeoff. You go with them, Biddy." He looked at Davey and added, "Leave the lad with me for a few minutes."

Joe's instructions were not questioned and a few moments later she was outside with the young men gazing in wonder at the sky. Everything was lighted up like the Fourth of July. But bigger—much bigger. From every horizon giant lights of all colors were shooting up to meet overhead. All the colors of the rainbow and some Biddy had never seen. "It's—it's beautiful!" she gasped.

One of the young men smiled without humor. "Let's hope a second display is never necessary." With that he hurried away with the others and there was great activity around the ship. Then Joe came out—just as the colors overhead were dying—and gave a signal and the men entered the cave. Pretty soon they came out and all the mechanism and the big shining box were floating along behind them — floating through the air—as they were pulled toward the ship by thin lines of metal rope.

In no time Joe was walking with Biddy toward the loaded ship, holding her small hand in his. He stood by the port and said, "I think maybe things will be all right, child. I hope so, because there must be many like you and Davey. There must be sane reason left on this mad planet."

"Are you going away, Joe?"

"Yes, Biddy." He smiled and kissed her and said, "Tell Buck good-bye for me. Davey is in the cave." He entered the ship and the port closed and Biddy didn't see it take off at all. It just seemed to evaporate—to vanish. But then, her eyes were misty with tears and she thought she might have missed the take off. She turned and walked slowly toward the cave. Slowly because she knew of course that Davey would be all right . . .

Davey Taber stood on two fine straight legs in the Parker living room looking out the window over a silent, subdued Sage Bend. He turned and said, "Dad will have

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to be very careful from now on. He will be in bed for a long time and then in a wheelchair, so I'm taking over the Circle-7."

"I'm sorry about your father," Jane said. "I'm sorry for the people, for—" she glanced at Dan Parker seated beside her and no more words would come.

"I want you to stay on, Mr. Parker. In fact I want you to take more responsibility. I'll need a wise experienced head and I'm afraid I'd be lost without you."

"Wait a minute," Dan said quietly. "There are some things I have to tell you—some things you've got to know so you'll understand why I can't stay at the Circle-7."

And while Davey listened in silence, Dan told the whole story of his fears and actions and weaknesses. He did not spare himself and the telling took quite a while. When he finished there was silence. And something more. Jane's hand had crept toward his and now she held it tight and smiled proudly as she looked into his eyes.

Davey regarded them in silence for a few moments, then spoke quietly but without smiling. "That's all you have to say?"

"That's all."

"I asked because I want it over and done with—and forgotten here and now. I'll expect you at the ranch in the morning. I have other plans, too. We'll build you a house out there so you won't have to run back and forth. Dad should have done that long ago."

Dan said, "But—"

"But nothing." Davey smiled now—at Biddy. "I've got an ulterior motive. I want Biddy around all the time because we've got a lot of talking to do."

Biddy smiled back. "About Joe."

"That's right. About Joe."

THE END

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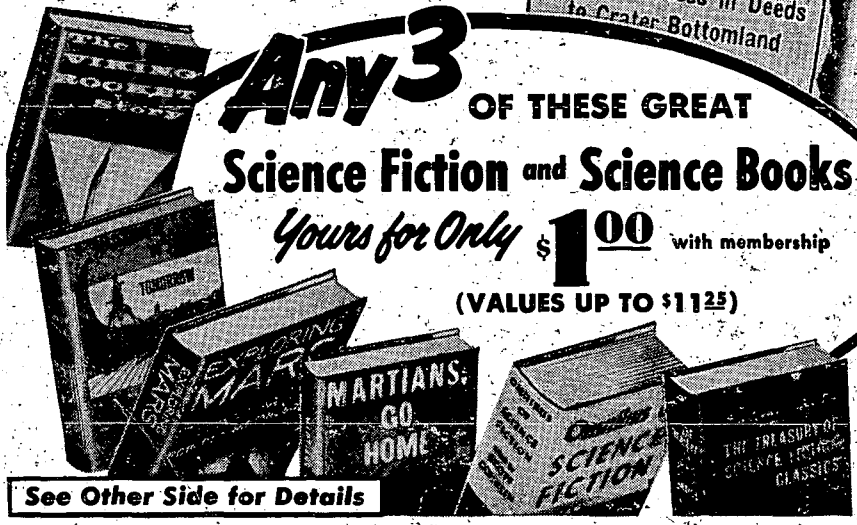

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